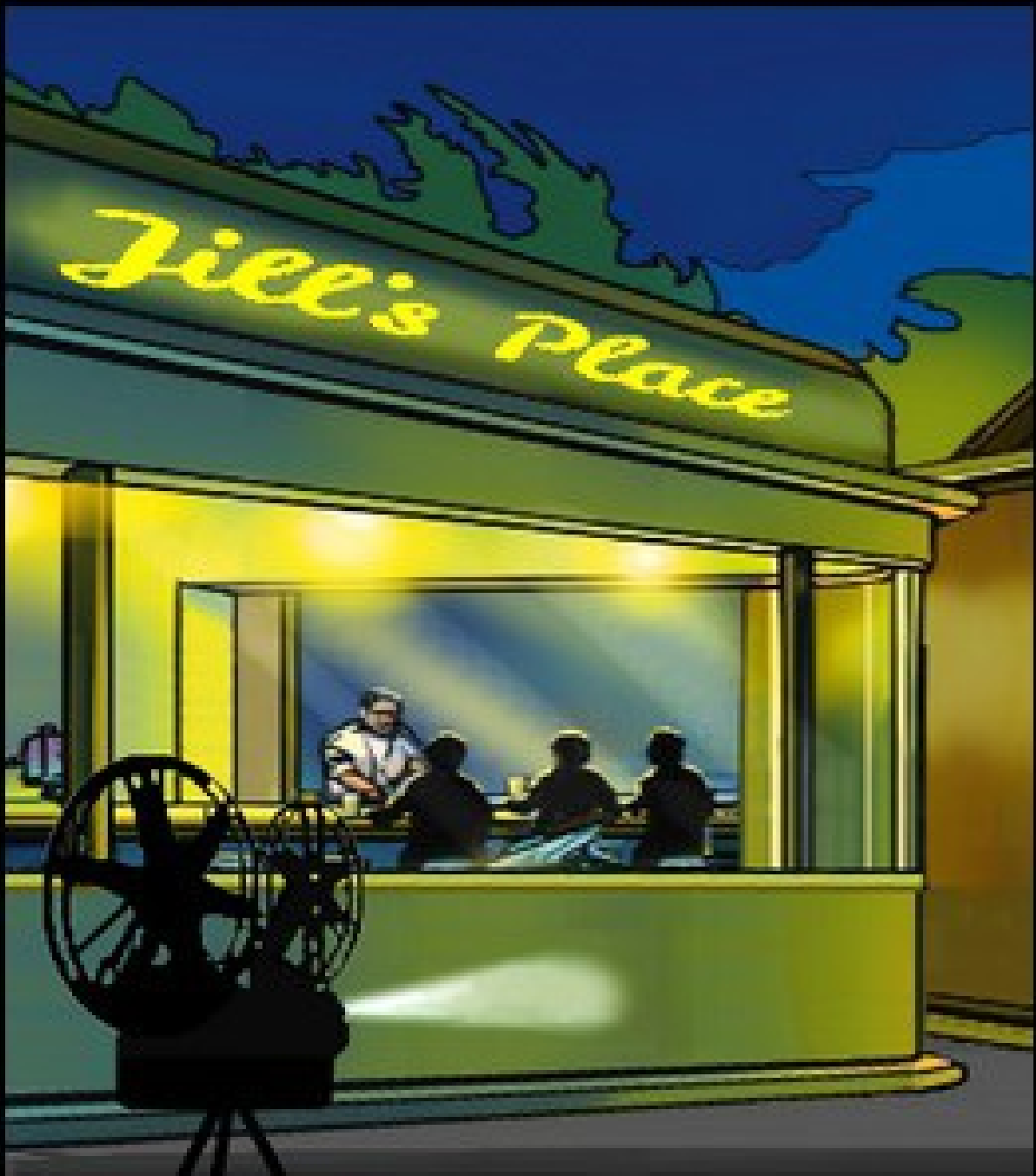


# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## THE MYSTERY OF THE THREE PARALLEL CASES

### CASE 1: THE FOREST CABIN





in

**THE MYSTERY  
OF THE  
THREE PARALLEL CASES**

**Case I: The Forest Cabin**

Three possible cases are available to The Three Investigators on the same days... in parallel! But which one will occur? Can an inconspicuous toppling of a drinking glass determine the course of events? In this particular case, which may or may not happen, Jupiter buys an old film projector and discovers a mysterious film clip hidden in it. Together with Pete and Bob, he investigates an eerie event that happened a long time ago in a forest cabin—something that has put an entire neighbourhood in fear and anxiety.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Three Parallel Cases  
Case I: The Forest Cabin

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*Translated, adapted, and edited from:*

*Die drei ??? und der dreiTag  
[J] Der Fluch der Sheldon Street*

*(The Three ??? and the Three-Day)  
([J] The Curse of Sheldon Street)*

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## **Contents**

- 1. A Drinking Glass Topples**
- 2. A Great Offer**
- 3. The Hidden Film Clip**
- 4. Dark Memories**
- 5. Investigations Start**
- 6. A Neighbourhood in Fear**
- 7. An Emotional Wreck**
- 8. A Near Accident for Pete**
- 9. Bob Researches**
- 10. War Council**
- 11. At the Haunted Cabin**
- 12. The Night Intruder**
- 13. Friday the 13th**
- 14. The White Cat**
- 15. The Wings of the Goose**
- 16. Turning Point**
- 17. The Curse of Sheldon Street**
- 18. Back at Jill's Place**

## 1. A Drinking Glass Topples

“Are you done with the report?” Jupiter sipped impatiently on his glass of Coke.

The Three Investigators sat in Jill’s Place—a cosy western-style fast food restaurant in downtown Rocky Beach. The rays of the afternoon sun fell through the huge window front, which stretched almost around the entire building.

Bob replied with an affirmative ‘hmm’ but did not allow himself to be distracted. The investigator responsible for records and research was about to finish jotting down the notes of their just-concluded case. Without a computer, he did so by hand in his notebook.

“Now don’t rush him,” Pete said. “After all, this was one of the most difficult cases in the history of our agency.”

“Yes, but I’m hungry!” Jupiter demonstratively stroked his fat belly. Once again he glanced longingly at the neighbouring tables, from which the seductive smell of the hamburgers that Jill’s Place was famous for drifted across the room.

Jupiter’s mouth watered at the thought of all these grilled delicacies. All the hamburger creations in Jill’s Place were named after famous characters from western movies—the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese; the Cogburn Chicken with hearty mayonnaise; the Double Chisum with extra beef, bacon and fried onions; the hellishly hot Django Chilli; and of course, Jill’s Dream with the famous McBain special sauce...

“Don’t forget... we’re also here to celebrate the huge bargain I got at the garage sale earlier,” Jupe added.

Pete grinned. “That film projector really got to you, Jupe. Anyway, Mrs Sullivan was probably glad to get rid of it.”

The face of the First Investigator brightened up suddenly. “A genuine Novalux T-800,” he said ecstatically. “Over thirty years old and still looks as good as new. And for just five dollars—that’s what I call luck!”

“What do you want to do with such an old projector?” Pete asked.

“These projectors are pretty rare and worth quite a bit,” Jupe replied. “If it’s working, I just need to clean it up; if not, I’ll try to fix it. Anyway, I hope to sell it for a lot more than I paid for—”

“—Which will be handed over to the police on Friday. Report complete!” Bob put his pencil down, beaming. “So, fellas, that concludes our case for the day.”

Shaking his head, Pete skimmed the report. “Boy, that was really crazy. The names alone confuse me.”

“Well, it’s over now,” Jupiter replied succinctly. He was obviously keen to move on to the next item on the agenda as quickly as possible. “And now that the report is done, we can finally turn to the menu!”

Bob grabbed hold of the menu, which was in the shape of an oversized sheriff’s star, and leafed through it.

“Hey! I want to order first,” Jupe exclaimed.

“No way,” Bob argued. “You two had all the time to look at the menu when I was finishing up the report, but you didn’t... so I’m ordering first.”

“How come there is only one copy of the menu at our table?” Pete wondered.

At that moment, the mobile phone in Jupiter's pocket rang. "Why is somebody calling now when I'm so hungry..." He sighed and hurriedly rummaged through his pocket for his mobile phone.

"I'll go get another copy of the menu..." Pete turned looking. "Ah, there's one over there on that vacant table." The Second Investigator hastily got up and bumped against the table causing Jupiter's almost-full glass to sway dangerously.

"Aaaargh!" In a spontaneous response, Bob reached forward, but it was too late. With a muffled clink, the glass fell over and its dark brown contents splashed over the newspaper spread out on the table in front of Juve. "Oh gosh!"

As a reflex action, Juve backed up and jumped away from the table. In the process, the phone dropped from his fingers, clattered on the floor, and slipped away.

"Bull's-eye!" Accusingly, Bob pointed to the sticky cola lake. Frantically, he and Pete plucked one paper napkin after another from the dispenser in an attempt to contain the drink from spilling further.

Jupiter looked all around the floor for the phone as the ringtone echoed loudly through the restaurant. Some of the other guests had turned to look at the three of them. An elderly man at the next table shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"Way to go, Pete! All across the newspaper," Bob remarked and pointed to the sticky cola lake. "How can you be so clumsy?"

Feeling guilty, Pete helped to contain the flood with the napkins. "Sorry, I didn't mean it."

"The newspaper is all wet and sticky. Yuck!" With pointed fingers, Bob folded the muddy remains of *Rocky Beach Today* together and threw them in the waste basket. "Luckily the menu is not damaged."

Jupiter went down searching for his mobile phone on all fours. Meanwhile, Pete managed to finish up the drying and threw the soaked napkins away.

"There! There! I've got it," Jupiter's voice came from under the table. He quickly pressed the 'answer' button. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking..." he said. "Hello? Hello? He hung up. Bummer!"

"He might call back again," Bob said.

"Anyway," the First Investigator continued, "now we should deal with the really important thing—the menu." He grabbed the menu and leafed through it. But first, he had to find a substitute for the spilled Coke. "I need a new drink... and to celebrate, I'm gonna try this vanilla-flavoured Cocoa Special."

"Sounds good!" Pete remarked. "Juve, please hurry up with the menu? I still have to order."

After Juve decided on his order, he handed Pete the menu.

"Be careful not to knock over anything else, you clumsy clot!" Bob said. "People are looking over at us."

"Oh yeah? Who?" Pete asked.

"Over there on your left," Bob said. "That blonde girl sitting there with the elderly lady. They were pointing at us—obviously amused with your clumsiness."

"Oh well," Pete remarked and began to laugh heartily to earn scathing looks from his friend.

## 2. A Great Offer

A good hour later, after the three of them had eaten a few hot brownies with vanilla ice cream to top it off, they were full. Jupiter paid the bill, and they made their way to Pete's red MG.

Although the Second Investigator had his car parked halfway in the shade, it was unbearable when they got into it. Moaning, Jupiter fanned himself with an old brochure. He really had nothing against the famous Californian summer weather, but this blazing heat was simply unbearable. The air that streamed through the open windows into the interior of the car hardly cooled them down at all. With merciless power, the sun burned down from the sky, where no cloud had shown up for what felt like an eternity.

During the past days, the temperatures had risen steadily, but there still seemed to be room for improvement. On this Wednesday in July, the thermometer showed a proud 35 degrees Celsius and not the slightest breeze blew over the country from the smooth Pacific. Even the birds flew around sporadically. Most of them sought shady spots in the tree tops during the day.

The only consolation was that the meteorologist had predicted heavy thunderstorms for Friday. This was not only what the coastal dwellers were longing for, the parched forests were also in desperate need of water. Fortunately, there were no devastating forest fires, but the danger grew with each additional dry day.

Moaning, Bob wiped his T-shirt across his forehead which was glistening with beads of sweat. "Your car is a rolling oven, Pete. You can cook a pizza in here!"

"Yeah, sure, unlike your cool Beetle. The shape alone tells us it's a mobile igloo..." Pete mocked.

"No car can withstand these Saharan temperatures," Jupiter commented. "This has been going on for days and it's still getting hotter. Hopefully, the cooling-off that we've been told will happen soon."

"Better get back to the salvage yard quick!" Bob urged. "At least there's a big fan waiting for us at Headquarters."

"Well, I just hope it cools off by Saturday," muttered Pete. "I have to mow the lawn at the Robinsons—and they've got a great big garden there."

The First Investigator frowned. "Well, if the temperature is still like this, I'd give it a miss if I were you."

"I can't just cancel it," Pete objected. "The Robinsons are paying me pretty good, and you know I'm trying to earn and save some money."

"Yes, I know you're saving up for that torture apparatus..." Jupiter replied and pulled a face.

"It's the Gladiator Fitness Station, to be precise," the Second Investigator corrected. "A multi-function machine for strength and endurance training with over forty exercise possibilities—dual weight stacks, a bench press, butterfly press, leg curl, lat pulldown, hydraulically adjustable stepper..."

"Yeah, yeah!" Jupiter waved violently. "I'm starting to sweat just listening to you. How could anyone do this to himself voluntarily?"

Pete threw Jupiter a probing side glance. “Well, you won’t appreciate it since you’re not exactly the gladiator type.”

“Right,” Bob agreed with a wink. “Our Jupe in ancient Rome would have been more like an imperial food taster...”

Ten minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard. Several days ago, a construction company had started road repair works right in front of the entrance to the yard. At this moment, two construction workers were busy tearing up the road surface with heavy pneumatic hammers.

“They’ve been at it all week,” sighed Jupiter. “From seven in the morning until six in the evening.” The annoyance was written all over his face.

The rattling got louder and louder and the Second Investigator frantically cranked up the side window. He shook his head impatiently. “What exactly are they doing?”

“They make noise,” replied Jupiter as they drove past the construction site. Even with the windows closed, he almost had to scream.

Pete covered his ear with his left hand. With the other hand, he carefully wiggled his MG past a bulldozer, and steered through the wide gate into the salvage yard. “That would get on my nerves too!”

Jupiter nodded. “I don’t need to explain to you what effect this will have on business.”

Pete parked his car in front of the yard office. When the three of them were getting out of the car, a lean man in his forties wearing a trench coat approached them. Despite his narrow face, a stately double chin emerged from his shirt collar. The short black hair stood confusingly away from his head and his hectic winking indicated strong excitement.

“Er... excuse me,” the man said. “I’m looking for a film projector.”

A film projector? It must be a coincidence that this man was looking for a similar item that The Three Investigators had just bought earlier in the day.

“Oh, uh—then I’d best bring you to our storeroom.” Jupiter turned briefly to his friends. “I’ll be right back, fellas.”

With a friendly smile, the First Investigator showed his visitor the way to the big storeroom. “Is there anything in particular you’re looking for, Mr... uh...”

“Dawson, Sebastian Dawson,” the man replied.

“And I’m Jupiter Jones... Very pleased to meet you.”

Nodding, Dawson continued: “It’s about something specific. I’m interested in... in the Novalux that you bought from Mrs Sullivan this morning.”

Astonished, Jupiter tilted his head. “May I ask how you know about that?”

“Oh, I went to Mrs Sullivan in response to her ad in the newspaper, but unfortunately I was too late,” Mr Dawson said. “She told me that she had already sold it to you and she was kind enough to give me your address.”

“Oh, yes,” Jupiter said. “Well, Mr Dawson, I’m very sorry, but that projector is not for sale. I wonder if I might show you what else we have here.”

The man shook his head vigorously. “No... no thanks. I’m a collector and the Novalux is what I want. Could a fifty dollar uh... offer possibly change your mind?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that item is not for sale,” Jupe repeated.

An enigmatic smile flitted across Dawson’s face. “Naturally, I uh... understand... say, what about a hundred dollars?”

“Mr Dawson, we really appreciate your generous offer, but we haven’t even checked if the projector still works at all,” Jupiter said.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Mr Dawson replied quickly.

Jupiter could not say exactly why, but he disliked the frantic persistence of the man. He felt himself under pressure. “No, no, you don’t seem to understand me. We want to—”

“Two hundred dollars!” Mr Dawson interrupted him.

Defensively, the First Investigator raised his hand. “Sir, I just told you—”

“Hey, nothing in the world is unsellable,” Mr Dawson interrupted him. “I’ll tell you what, I really want that projector. When you decide to sell it, call me. Just don’t sell it to others. My current offer is two hundred dollars.” He gave Jupiter a card with his name and mobile number, and then he went away.

A few seconds later, Bob and Pete was with Jupe. “What did he want?” Bob asked.

The First Investigator brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. “Mr Dawson has a very keen interest in our Novalux projector and offered to pay two hundred dollars for it.”

“Two hundred dollars?” Pete hissed. He stared at Jupiter imploringly. It was obvious what the Second Investigator thought of the offer—he was determined to accept it.

“Jupe, why didn’t you sell it to him?” Bob added.

“And you only paid five dollars for it!” Pete said. “That old projector probably doesn’t even work anymore.”

Bob nodded in agreement. “You don’t even need to check whether it is working or not. For that price, just sell it as is!”

“I don’t know.” Jupiter frowned. “I had a hunch that something was rotten about it.” On the other hand, The Three Investigators could use the money well. As usual, their common fund was almost empty.

The First Investigator struggled to put his concerns aside, but he succeeded. He didn’t have to smell a dark secret in everything and everyone. Perhaps Mr Dawson was really nothing more than an eccentric, wealthy collector.

“How about we take a close look at the Novalux,” he finally said. “Let’s bring it to Headquarters.”

### 3. The Hidden Film Clip

Headquarters was actually an old mobile home trailer that they had received as a gift from Uncle Titus a long time ago. The Three Investigators had hidden it under a pile of scrap metal and other junk. Since then, the trailer could only be entered via secret passages. One of them was the Cold Gate, an old and huge refrigerator which was leaning against a pile of junk as if by chance. Inside the fridge, by activating a secret mechanism, the back wall could be pushed aside, revealing a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main entrance of the trailer.

In addition to a few worn out armchairs and a table, Headquarters was equipped with everything they needed for their investigation work—telephone, fax, a computer with printer and Internet connection, and even a small crime lab, where they analyzed traces and fingerprints. Nearly every available space of the trailer was used to make room for shelves and cupboards to store diverse investigation equipment and dozens of files containing reports of their earlier cases.

“It’s another oven in here,” grumbled Pete as he stepped in. “Such high temperatures should be banned!”

“That’s right,” Bob agreed as he moved the large floor fan closer. “A few more degrees and we can open up a sauna and get in.”

“If only the Cold Gate would live up to its name...” Pete remarked and sceptically, he looked over at Bob. “Is the fan really running at full power?”

“What do you think? If it spins any faster, it’ll take off,” Bob said.

Gently Jupiter put the box down on the table and lifted out the nostalgic film projector. “Splendid! What a wonderful machine...” he said after he carefully positioned it on the table. He looked at it from all sides, and suddenly he stopped.

“The floor fasteners seem to have come loose during transport. Wait a minute...” Carefully he opened the lower cover. “Hello? Look... there is a narrow cavity here... and inside... there is a small reel of film taped to it.”

While he carefully detached the reel, Pete and Bob came closer.

“It’s just another old reel of film,” Pete remarked.

“Probably a private recording of some boring holiday or something,” Bob grinned.

Jupiter examined the housing of the projector. “Hmm... strange. The reel was down here in the little cavity. It can only be seen when the lower cover is opened.”

Then he examined the reel in detail. “Hmm... Super 8 film... Seems pretty banged up. It could belong to Mrs Sullivan. What do you think? Should we check out this film before we contact her about it?”

“I think so,” Bob replied and reached for the dimmer of the floor lamp. “I’m gonna go ahead and darken the place up.”

Jupiter nodded. “And you could flip over that map over there, Pete. Then we’d have a temporary screen so I wouldn’t have to go looking for one in the yard.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t want to go out there in this heatwave,” Pete said as he bent over the table to turn over the map of California hanging there.

Jupiter then clamped the reel of film in the projector and plugged the cord into the power socket. A few seconds later, he asked: "Everyone ready?"

Bob nodded. Pete switched off the lights and the trailer was turned into a darkened screening room.

"Roll it!" Jupiter pressed a small button and with a soft rattle, the Novalux came to life. "Wow," he said softly. "Purrs like new."

A summer garden scene appeared on the screen. Several partly dressed up children laughed and played around a big table. In the centre was a cake decorated with candles.

Bob smiled, amused. "Looks like a kid's birthday. Look at those bell-bottoms and... are they wearing wigs?"

"Those are their hairstyles, Bob!" Pete added amusedly. "There were no fashion police back then, were there?"

Jupiter smiled. "That must have been in the seventies. People liked to let it grow a little."

"A little is good," Bob remarked. "Well, it looks like a live clip from *The Muppet Show*!"

"In any case, the film projector still works," Pete noted.

Jupiter nodded. "Of course. In this case it goes without saying that—" Suddenly, the First Investigator stopped.

Pete was startled too. The birthday video recording was cut off and there was a change of scene. "Hey! What's that?" Pete exclaimed.

"... It's the front of a house in the twilight," muttered Bob. "You can hardly see anything except a dark window."

All of a sudden a figure appeared at the dirty window and made the boys flinch.

"Man, that scared me!" Pete exclaimed. "Is that a woman?"

"Yes," Jupiter hesitantly confirmed. "She stands with her back to the window, pushing aside the curtains. It seems as if she is in front of something... Oh my goodness!"

Shocked, The Three Investigators stared at the screen.

"What kind of a face is that?" Bob managed to say with difficulty.

Worried, Jupiter bent over to look closely. "A deadly pale man with an eye patch and his mouth wide open!"

Pete's lips trembled. "Look! He is moving towards the woman..."

"Wait! Now the scene changes back again!" Jupiter exclaimed.

"—Back to the birthday party," the Second Investigator added.

A few moments later, the video ended abruptly.

"That's it," commented Bob succinctly. "So much for it."

Nervously, Pete turned around. "Jupe... what does this mean?"

Perplexed, the First Investigator shook his head. "I have no idea."

"Was that even a person?" Stunned, Pete wrung his hands. "That cold, staring eye and that twitching mouth... Man, I still have goose bumps."

With a strained expression, Jupiter tried to bring what they had seen into a logical structure. "The fact is... someone filmed this strange scene, later edited out this piece and inserted it between the harmless birthday party video."

Bob frowned in surprise. "You mean so no one will find it?"

"Yes, it was done on purpose... and it doesn't look like a gag," Jupiter said. "No, in my opinion, the birthday video is clearly for concealing the window shot. Let me check something..."

Jupiter took out the reel of film and carefully examined it. "Yes, here it is..." he said. "See! There are two splices in the film, both done with press tapes."

“So someone wanted to hide the scene with this ghost pirate from other people...” the Second Investigator surmised.

“I am convinced of it. The facts speak for themselves. As a further security measure, this roll of film was then hidden in the cavity under the projector. If the lower cover hadn’t come loose during transport, we never would have found this hidden film.”

“Okay,” Bob agreed. “So there must be something special about this film. You only hide an item if it’s secret or valuable in some way.”

“... Or dangerous,” added Jupiter seriously.

Pete crossed his arms. “Great, here we are sitting together after a delicious meal, thinking of nothing of this sort—and not even thirty minutes later, we are already in the middle of another scary case!”

“I agree with ‘scary’,” the First Investigator said, “but that there is any illegality involved here is a speculation.”

“Well, the encounter between the woman and this ghost pirate did not look very friendly,” Pete objected. “And if all that didn’t mean anything, all this effort with splicing the film and hiding it in the projector would be totally pointless, wouldn’t it?”

“I would not want to contradict your argument at all,” replied Jupiter. “I only wanted to clarify that the incomplete facts do not yet allow for a final judgement.”

“My goodness,” the Second Investigator said. “Just say we haven’t the faintest idea what this creepiness is all about!”

“That would also be an accurate summary,” Jupiter admitted. “For the sake of clarity, we should definitely check with Mrs Sullivan.”

Bob nodded. “Sounds good. Maybe the whole thing will turn out to be completely harmless.”

“And if not?” Pete asked worriedly.

In the eyes of the First Investigator, it flashed adventurously. “Then The Three Investigators will have a new case!”

## 4. Dark Memories

Jupiter had contacted Mrs Sullivan by telephone to arrange for a visit. “We’ll bring the film and the projector along so that we could play the clip for Mrs Sullivan,” he said.

“Just as well...” Bob said. “Under the circumstances, maybe it’s better if we don’t leave it here unattended, right?”

The First Investigator nodded affirmatively. “I couldn’t agree with you more, Bob. While I think it is unlikely that Dawson will lie in wait for us to leave Headquarters, we should take precautions.”

“This sweltering heat does not leave our genius Jupiter Jones untouched,” Bob noted with a smile.

“All right, I’ll bring the flux capacitor out,” Pete said.

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “Novalux projector! Novalux T-800, to be exact!”

The Three Investigators left Headquarters and headed for Bob’s Beetle, which had been parked at the yard since morning. A moment later, the box with the projector was safely stowed away in the back seat of the Beetle, and the boys set off.

However, the road works just outside the salvage yard made turning out of the driveway considerably more difficult.

“Gee,” growled Bob. “Couldn’t they park their excavator further away from the driveway? It is as if that they are purposely wanting to obstruct us!”

Suddenly, Pete pointed to the front in horror. “Watch out, Bob—the truck ahead!” With a quick evasive manoeuvre, Bob just managed to avoid the truck backing up, but got onto the oncoming lane for a brief moment.

“Be careful with your junk!” shouted the driver of a rust-brown Ford Pinto who gestured angrily out the open window.

Bob turned and looked into the wrinkled, angry face of an old man whose sweeping full white beard did not fit him at all. “Oh yeah? You take care of your dung bucket!” Bob shouted angrily back. “You stupid—”

Jupiter tapped him on the shoulder calmly. “Now calm down. Nothing happened.”

But Bob’s indignation did not want to fade so quickly. “My beautiful Beetle... That was unwarranted abuse.”

“By the way, I was thinking...” Pete tried to change to another subject, “would it be possible that Dawson was after the film.”

“It’s possible,” replied Jupiter. “For that, he would have to know about the hiding place. In any case, we’ll go and ask Mrs Sullivan if she knows Dawson. By the way, she mentioned earlier on the phone that two other people had called her to enquire about the projector after we left. One of them could very well be Dawson as he did tell me that.”

Frowning, Bob looked in the rear-view mirror at the box by Pete’s side. “Well, it looks like it is a really popular item... for some reason.”

Shortly afterwards, they had reached Kingston Lane. Tanya Sullivan, a graceful woman in her mid-thirties, led The Three Investigators through a long corridor to the kitchen. On the way there, Jupiter noticed a large glass display case containing several dozen detailed car and

aeroplane models. Such things would definitely be of interest to Uncle Titus, he thought with a smile.

In the kitchen, Mrs Sullivan served her guests juice and mineral water. After briefly explaining to her their discovery, the First Investigator connected the projector up and played the mysterious film clip.

When Pete switched on the light in the darkened kitchen a little later, Mrs Sullivan looked worriedly into the void.

After thinking for a few moments, she said: "That is my ninth birthday party... and... on the other clip... is the old cabin in Sheldon Forest—no doubt about it," she said. "Even as a kid, it always gave me the creeps. It was said to be haunted."

"Of course..." Pete whispered, barely audible.

"Whose cabin was that?" Jupiter asked.

"Our neighbour at the time, a couple named Preston," she replied. "In the old days, that was probably a hunting lodge, but the Prestons never used it."

"What about the filming?" Bob joined in. "Did your father or mother record it?"

"Neither." Mrs Sullivan paused briefly. "That must have been my grandfather, Desmond Kane. He was widowed at an early age and lived with us on Sheldon Street. He was really into filming. In fact, he was always filming something—the family, the house, the garden—everything he could see. Then all of a sudden, he stopped doing it."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Jupiter attentively.

"Well, and now, three months after his death, I finally wanted to sort out the old stuff in his attic that had been gathering dust for ages. The projector was there. My husband and I have no use for it anymore, and my parents have been living in Europe for several years."

Thoughtfully, Bob took a sip of water from the glass. "So this film dates back to when you and your family lived on Sheldon Street. Do you remember when you moved away from there?"

"Let's see... It was early summer... uh... twenty-seven years ago, at the end of May. I know because I celebrated my ninth birthday about two weeks earlier and could not understand at all why we had to move so suddenly shortly afterwards."

"You mean the move came as a surprise to you?" Pete followed up in amazement.

Mrs Sullivan nodded. "Absolutely! Even my parents seemed kind of taken by surprise. But nobody spoke about the reason for the move. One day, a truck appeared on the doorstep and everything happened so fast. Even later, when we were all settled here in Kingston Lane, I never got an explanation."

Jupiter pinched his lower lip, brooding. "Okay, let's summarize—on your ninth birthday, your grandfather made a video recording with his camera. Then probably around that time, he ventured into the forest at dusk."

"It's quite possible," Mrs Sullivan confirmed. "Grandpa was often out taking pictures and video of nature."

The First Investigator nodded. "That's when he must have been hanging around the forest cabin, perhaps by chance."

"And there, he watched this woman suddenly appear at the window and then the eerie figure," Bob added.

"Right," Jupiter agreed. "That scene must have made him remove it from the actual reel later and inserted it into the birthday party video."

"And then he hid the film in the projector," Pete added. "And you think that he was afraid of what he had recorded? ... And urged your family to move away from Sheldon Street?"

Mrs Sullivan looked around sceptically. “Sounds a bit strange, isn’t it?”

“Admittedly, our theory still has some gaps,” Jupiter confessed. “But if you agree, it would be our pleasure to fill in these gaps and unravel the mystery of what happened back then.”

“Oh, now I understand!” Tanya Sullivan smiled. “You left me your card this morning. Let’s see... where is it?” She went over to a drawer, opened it and reached in. “Here it is...” On her hand, she held out the business card of The Three Investigators and looked at it. It said:



“Hmm...” she mumbled. “You want to take on this case?”

The First Investigator returned the smile. “If you have no objection, we would be delighted.”

“Well, why not? I’d be interested to know what really happened back then. For example, you might ask Mr Gabbin, a former acquaintance of my grandfather’s who still lives on Sheldon Street.”

Bob wrote the name down in his notebook.

“I can also give you two more boxes where I kept some of Grandpa’s stuff,” Mrs Sullivan said. “You can see if there’s anything that might help you.”

“Thank you, we will,” Jupiter replied as he unplugged the projector cable from the socket. “Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask you, do you know that Mr Dawson?”

Mrs Sullivan shook her head. “No, I never heard of him before today.”

“I see.” The First Investigator thoughtfully rubbed his chin. “And what about the other prospective buyer who phoned you to ask about the projector? Do you know who that was?”

“Sorry, the man didn’t give his name.”

At that moment, the cry of a baby was heard from the upper floor.

“Oh, Daniel’s awake.” Mrs Sullivan rose. “Then Isabelle will be up soon. Is there anything I need to sign—a form or anything?”

Jupiter smiled. “A verbal confirmation will do perfectly.”

“Okay, then I hereby officially engage you to solve the mystery of the forest cabin. Now, if you could excuse me for fifteen minutes as it’s time for me to tackle the case of the hungry babies!”

A quarter of an hour later, Mrs Sullivan had taken care of her children and led The Three Investigators into the basement.

“Excuse the mess, but with all this fuss I haven’t had a chance to clean up in ages.” She pointed to a corner where there were two cardboard boxes next to an overturned tricycle and some toys. “Those are my grandfather’s things.” Sighing, she stroked the boxes. “That’s pretty much all he left us. You are welcome to take the boxes and examine them. I just want to ask you to be careful when you unpack. There are some fragile items in there as well.”

“Of course, Mrs Sullivan.” With a nod to Pete and Bob, Jupiter hinted that his colleagues could now carry the boxes upstairs.

“It wouldn’t be a real case without hauling boxes,” muttered Pete softly.

At the front door, the First Investigator suddenly remembered an important detail and turned to Mrs Sullivan. “I almost forgot to ask you for your former Sheldon Street address. It’s gonna be a little difficult without it.”

“Of course, you will need the address.” Mrs Sullivan paused to think while Bob put down the box and pulled out his notebook.

“Well, we lived at number 83. The Prestons lived next door at 81 and Mr Matthew Gabbin...” She narrowed her eyes in brooding. “He would be at number 74 or 76, but I’m not very sure.”

“We’ll find him, thank you very much,” Jupiter replied and shook hands with Mrs Sullivan.

“Well, good luck with your investigation.”

Thoughtfully The Three Investigators strolled back to Bob’s Beetle.

On the return journey to the salvage yard, Jupiter immediately began coordinating the next steps. “I’d say we’re going two ways. You, Bob, hook up the projector again at Headquarters and take a freeze frame of our ghost pirate. Maybe you can do some computer work on it afterwards to get a better view of the face.”

“I can try, but I don’t think it will do much good,” Bob said. “The quality of the video clip is rather poor because of the low light.”

“And that is nicely put,” Pete agreed with him. “Compared to today’s technology, that is pure Stone Age material.”

“We simply have no choice but to come to terms with this Stone Age material,” the First Investigator noted and turned back to Bob. “When you have printed out a reasonably useful image, go to the police department and ask Inspector Cotta to take a look at it. Who knows, perhaps it’s a known acquaintance.”

“Oh, you mean that this ghost pirate is listed in the criminal records?” Pete wondered, and his unease was clearly visible. “I can’t imagine what this guy actually looks like...”

“At the very least, it’s a possibility that must be explored,” Juve said. “If this is indeed a known criminal, we would have solved an important part of the mystery already.”

“What if this guy isn’t listed anywhere?” Bob asked.

“If the police have nothing, you can take it to the next level.”

Bob understood. “The newspaper, all right. My dad is at a meeting with a journalist friend of his in San Diego. Apparently he has some kind of big business story. I might as well go directly to the newspaper archives and see what I can find. So, what are you guys going to do?”

“Pete and I are going to check out Sheldon Street and interview Mrs Sullivan’s former neighbours about what happened back then. I’m curious to see what we can find out. I have high hopes for the Prestons in particular.”

“That’s right, they lived right next door,” Pete thought. “The sudden move of their neighbours must have caused quite a stir. After all, things like that don’t go unnoticed.”

“This is indeed to be expected,” Jupiter confirmed. “If we’re lucky, they may even know more about Mrs Sullivan’s grandfather and his camera hobby. As owners of the forest cabin, the Prestons may have known some of Mr Kane’s ventures.”

Bob smiled. "And if you hit the jackpot, the Prestons will even know the ghost pirate personally and have his current address and mobile phone number ready for you."

"Very funny, Bob." Jupiter looked around. "By the way... do you have anything to drink in the car? This heat is driving me crazy."

"Sorry, I drank the last of the mineral water earlier." Bob paused to think and smiled. "But I think there's some old fruit candy melting in the glove box."

"Great, anything will do," Jupiter grumbled as he wiped his hot forehead with a painful expression. "This heat is unbearable..."

## 5. Investigations Start

On arrival at the salvage yard, The Three Investigators separated as discussed. Bob went to Headquarters to capture a photo of the ghost pirate from the film while Pete and Jupiter drove off on the MG.

After fifteen minutes, they had reached the commercial area of Sheldon Street. Pete looked over in surprise at a small shop. “Funny, I thought that TV shop has shut down...”

The First Investigator’s gaze glided over to the old shop, which had its best years long since gone. Paint was peeling off all over the walls and the shop sign hung over the front door was barely legible. It was a sad picture of slow decay.

“For some years,” Jupiter confirmed. “Very unfortunate, but against the competition of the big department stores, that store simply could not compete.”

“Too bad,” Pete commented. “I think it’s the kind of place that lacks character in today’s mainstream.”

“You said it,” Jupiter agreed. “But what made you notice that shop?”

“Did you see several people standing outside the entrance? There were a few youths talking to a little fat guy that looked almost like Dick Perry from behind.”

The First Investigator smiled grimly. “Maybe our would-be Columbo would like to acquire the business. If so, I would suggest a slogan for him—‘Perry TV—Where Everything Goes Down the Tube’!”

Pete laughed. As that moment, he had reached the residential area of Sheldon Street.

“... Slow down a little now,” Jupe said. “We’re passing houses number seventy-something.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Pete slowed down and parked behind a white Lincoln.

Jupiter got out of the car and let his gaze wander over the row of houses to his right. “Ah, there’s number 83. So this is the house where Mrs Sullivan lived in before.” He walked a few steps closer. “According to the name plate, it’s the home of a Sarah Tomkins.”

“Perhaps I should take some photos.” Pete took a digital camera out of his backpack and pressed the power button. However, nothing moved. He tried it three more times, but the device was silent and the lens was locked.

“Oh, no. Jupe,” Pete gasped.

The First Investigator turned to his friend in astonishment. “What?”

“Well, here!” Frustrated, Pete passed the camera to Jupe. “It has stopped working again. It went out, just like that! You said you were going to take care of it!”

In terms of repair work, Jupiter was extremely talented. In the past, he had overcome numerous electronic problems and mastered almost hopeless repairs. This often saved Uncle Titus from having to hire expensive specialists when technical difficulties arose at the salvage yard. Moreover, many of the discarded devices that Jupiter had found had already been brought back to life through his efforts.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry.” The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment. “Somehow something always came up. You know how busy it’s been this week.”

Frowning, Jupiter took the stubborn device and looked at it from all sides. “It’s probably a contact problem in the battery compartment. Just a moment...”

Jupiter took out the batteries and put them back again. Within a short moment, there was a familiar humming sound.

“Voilà!” Grinning, Jupiter gave the camera back to his friend. “You just need an expert, and then you’ll be fine.”

“Especially when the expert is an incredibly lucky man,” Pete growled softly, grabbed the camera and took the first photos. Then he examined the result in the small display—a difficult task in the glaring sunlight.

Shortly afterwards, Pete made an interesting discovery. “Hey, look—next door at number 81.”

Jupiter looked at the door where there was a name plate with squiggled writing. “‘Clark Foley’—I guess we’re out of luck. The Prestons don’t live here anymore. I’m afraid we’ll have to cross our most promising name off the list for now.”

“Maybe one of the neighbours knows where the Prestons moved to. If it’s not too far away, we could visit them later.”

The First Investigator smiled. “Very commendable, Pete—always remain optimistic. Besides, I’m sure the Prestons aren’t the only ones with something to say about the forest cabin.”

“Right. A creepy haunted place like this should provide plenty to talk about.”

“I agree,” affirmed Jupiter. “So let’s get on with our big question and answer session!”

“All right.” Pete looked suspiciously over at Sheldon Forest. “Unless we have to investigate the forest cabin as well...”

“Of course not, what are you thinking?” asked the First Investigator in feigned amazement.

“Thank goodness.” Pete breathed softly. “I had already started to worry unnecessarily.”

“Actually, what I meant was in daylight, that would be much too conspicuous. That’s why we’ll do it at night,” continued Jupiter happily.

Pete couldn’t believe it. “You’re seriously thinking about coming back tonight and marching through the forest to that haunted cabin?”

“In fact, the three of us will march through the middle of the forest to that haunted cabin. After all, a full investigation requires a visit to the location in question.”

Pete turned around and muttered to himself: “I have clearly chosen a wrong hobby...”

“Good luck, Pete!” cried the First Investigator in a good mood.

“... A completely wrong hobby!” Pete mumbled.

## 6. A Neighbourhood in Fear

Just as Pete was about to take some more photos, he noticed a group of youths approaching from the other end of the street. He went back to Jupiter and drew his attention to the arrivals. "You might as well start with them. I'll try Miss Tomkins."

"All right," Jupiter agreed. He approached the group eagerly. If they lived here, they could certainly give him valuable information.

There were three boys and a girl, all about the same age, who strolled leisurely towards him. The tallest one of them seemed to be the leader. With his dark curls, broad shoulders and mirrored sunglasses, he could easily have stepped out of a surfer magazine. He casually had his arm wrapped around a blonde girl.

Smiling, Jupiter raised his hand. "Hello! Can I ask you a few questions? You're from here, aren't you?"

The tall one stopped in front of the First Investigator. "Who wants to know?"

"Oh, excuse me, my name is Jupiter Jones and I'm looking for information about the Preston family who used to live here."

Then the girl snapped her fingers and pointed at Jupiter. "Hey, now I recognize you! You're that fat boy who lives in a dump!"

The First Investigator frowned. "A salvage yard, to be exact—"

"Listen, fatso, we don't like you around here!" the tall guy gruffly interrupted him. "So you better get your big butt back in the car real quick and get out of here!"

From behind, Pete now approached, who had noticed that there were problems. "Hey, if you want to pick a fight, try someone your own size!"

"Oho!" murmured the leader, amused. "Fatty has brought his bodyguard."

"Oh come on, Steve—leave them alone. Let's not create trouble today!" The girl had put her hand on his shoulder and seemed to want to calm him down.

Steve hesitated briefly, exchanged another glance with the two other boys behind. Then he pinched his girlfriend's hip. "All right, Laury. Your wish is my command..."

"Come on." She pulled him by the sleeve and they walked on.

"You're lucky today," hissed one of the other two boys with a sinister expression. He was wearing a tattered black track suit jacket and seemed to be out for a riot, just like the leader.

But he was held back by his friend standing behind him—a chubby, pale boy with a frightened expression on his face. "Come on, Jack, let's go!"

A few seconds later, Jack turned around and made a final threat: "Hey, if we come back later, you're gone, understand?"

"We decide that for ourselves and no one else!" Pete cried after him, eager to fight.

Relieved, Jupiter wiped his sweaty forehead. "Thank you, Pete. Gosh, those guys seem to want to punch me in the head today."

"They were probably just trying to show off in front of the girl," Pete remarked.

"Possibly." Jupiter took a deep breath. "I was under the impression that strangers are generally not welcome here."

“You mean they wanna stay here by themselves, threatening to beat up anyone who accidentally strays into Sheldon Street?”

“Those guys hardly let me finish talking, and they were hostile from the start, almost as if they saw in me some kind of a threat to be got rid of as soon as possible.”

Pete smiled. “Pardon my bluntness, Juve, but you don’t look like a threat to anybody—especially to that beach boy.”

“Perfectly true,” replied the First Investigator, without elaborating on that comment. “And so, I think it was less about me as a person and more about what I could do here.”

Pete put his head at an angle, irritated. “Which is?”

“Exactly what we’re going to do—interview the residents!”

“So you think it annoys those guys to have us investigating?” The Second Investigator thought for a moment. “But, of course, that suspicion doesn’t stop us from doing our questioning anyway, right?”

Jupiter smiled broadly. “You’re absolutely right.”

“I thought so.” With a theatrical sigh, Pete turned towards house number 83. “Well, good luck with that. And try not to let anyone else threaten you again.”

“I’ll do my best!” The First Investigator glanced briefly at the address Bob had given him, then headed to number 74 to try his luck with Mr Gabbin.

After Jupiter had rung the bell, it didn’t take long before the heavy door was unlocked. A slim, dark-haired man in his thirties opened and looked at him suspiciously.

“Yeah?”

Jupiter was a little irritated because he had expected a much older person.

“Good afternoon, sir. Uh, are you Matthew Gabbin?”

“No, I am John, his nephew,” the man replied unkindly. “What do you want with my uncle?”

“My name is Jupiter Jones and I’d like to ask your uncle some questions about your former neighbours.”

“Wait...” John Gabbin turned around and went into the house. “Matt? Somebody wants something from you.”

Shortly afterwards a deeply bowed man, whom the First Investigator estimated to be at least eighty years old, came to the door. He had neatly parted snow-white hair and was wearing an old-fashioned shirt with a stand-up collar, vest and pocket watch. The trembling of his hands and his persistent hoarse cough indicated that his health was not at its best.

“Yeah?”

“Good afternoon, Mr Gabbin. My name is Jupiter Jones and—”

“What do you want?” Gabbin cut him off in a fit of sudden agitation. “If you’re selling something, I don’t buy nothing at the door—no drugs, no humbug. So get outta here or I’m gonna get my shotgun!”

With these words the old man slammed the door. For a short moment, Jupiter was simply speechless. Stunned, he shook his head.

“Uh... okay, obviously someone has woken up on the wrong side of bed today... but I don’t think I’m gonna give up that easily.”

At the same time, Pete rang the doorbell at number 83 Sheldon Street. After a few seconds, the door opened a gap but remained secured from the inside with a chain. A chubby little woman in her early forties looked at the visitor in a state of uncertainty.

“Yes?”

“Sorry to disturb you, Miss Tomkins. My name is Pete Crenshaw and I have a quick question about your former neighbours, the Prestons.”

“I never had anything to do with the Prestons, never!” the woman brusquely replied. Her face reflected a mixture of anger and fear. “What do you care anyway? My advice to you is to stay away from things that are long gone.”

Pete had not expected such a violent reaction. Half-heartedly, he started a second attempt. “Can’t you at least tell me why you have such bad memories of the Prestons?”

Miss Tomkins raised her hand dismissively. “I’ve said too much already. Please leave me alone, for our own good and yours.” Without another word she slammed the door in Pete’s face. Confused, the Second Investigator turned away.

“Very encouraging... I hope I can get more out of the next person.”

At the house next door, it took a while for Mr Foley to appear at the door. He was a lanky man in his fifties, and his head was covered in a thin wreath of hair.

Pete wondered for a moment whether he should apologize for the intrusion, as Foley was wrapped in a brown and yellow striped bathrobe and looked as if he had just got out of the shower. However, not a single drop of water was to be found on him and besides, the man was wearing green knee socks and leather slippers. Perhaps this strange outfit was simply his leisure outfit.

Surprised, Foley looked at the Second Investigator. “Yes?”

“Good afternoon, Mr Foley,” Pete said. “I’d like to ask you about the former occupant of your house, the Prestons.”

Startled, the man flinched. The corners of his mouth trembled.

“What is this? Are you with them? Why have you come now after all these years? We always kept our mouths shut! What more do you want?”

Pete shook his head in bewilderment. “Sir, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Goodness, let it be over at last,” Foley breathed barely audible and closed the door.

The Second Investigator tried to sort his thoughts. “I’m beginning to believe something is not right at all.”

## 7. An Emotional Wreck

Meanwhile, Jupiter made a second attempt with Mr Gabbin. This time, the old man was right at the door, fuming with rage.

“You again? I told you to get out of here with whatever you are selling! I’ll get you out of here...”

Mr Gabbin fiddled frantically in a large cupboard next to the door, but before he could reach for a shotgun, Jupiter held his quickly drawn business card in front of the old man’s nose.

“Sir, look, please!” he shouted emphatically, so that the old man could really understand him. “I’m not trying to sell you anything. I’m an investigator.”

Reluctantly, Gabbin reached for the card and read it. Slowly he lowered his hand, which was now clearly shaking. The fact that he was dealing with an investigator seemed to worry him deeply and he suddenly seemed powerless and disturbed.

“So... what do you want from me?”

Jupiter smiled timidly. He no longer seemed to have to fear physical violence.

“I’m here on behalf of a former neighbour of yours, Mrs Sullivan. And I’d like to ask you a few questions about the Prestons who—”

“Are you out of your mind?” Horrified, Gabbin grabbed the First Investigator by the shoulder. “Get in there!”

Jupiter did not know what happened to him at first. Suddenly, he found himself in the hallway while Gabbin hastily closed the door.

“Never say that name!” gasped the old man. “Do you hear? Never ever!”

Jupiter looked at him without understanding. “But why? What are you talking about?”

Mr Gabbin leaned against the cupboard, coughing. Only now did the First Investigator get a chance to look down the hall.

Despite his tension, Jupiter was immediately struck by the impeccable order in the house. The doormat was exactly at right angles to the threshold and the various jackets on the wardrobe were all lined up at exactly the same distance. The two shelves and the small shoe cupboard were so well looked after that they appeared as if they were unused. The curtains at the two windows were folded with equal accuracy and none of the landscape paintings on the walls were hung even slightly crooked. There seemed to be not a single object that was not in its intended place. Mr Gabbin obviously placed great value on precision.

The old man was still gasping for breath. He was visibly shaken. “This place was a paradise—full of joy and life. Then the Prestons came, and darkness followed.”

“Darkness?” Jupiter was startled. “Are you talking about the cabin in the forest?”

Shocked, Gabbin took a step back. “How do you know about that?”

“We found an old video recording of the cabin.”

“What?” Mr Gabbin asked. “Where did you find that?”

“It was a reel of film in an old projector that belonged to Mrs Sullivan’s grandfather, Desmond Kane,” Jupiter explained.

“Uh-huh... I tell you—forget the cabin!” the old man interrupted him with eyes wide open. “Forget the Prestons, I urge you seriously!”

The dull uneasiness that had risen in Jupiter a while ago had meanwhile turned into real uneasiness. “What is wrong with the cabin?” he asked.

Gabbin raised his hands, trembling more and more violently in a defensive manner. “No one is allowed there, no one...” he gasped with a glazed look. “It is forbidden to go there... forbidden!”

“Sir, why is it forbidden?” Jupiter asked calmly and anxiously.

The old man lowered his arms and stared piercingly at the First Investigator. “Evil dwells in that cabin.”

“Evil?” Jupiter’s confusion was growing. “What do you mean?”

Gabbin turned his face away and looked expressionlessly into the void. “My wife... she was too curious... One night she couldn’t resist it... and—”

Confused, the First Investigator looked out of the small window next to the front door. “She... she went into the forest?”

“Over and over again, I told her—stay away from that cabin!” The hoarse cough turned into a deep sob. “Why didn’t she listen to me?”

“Mr Gabbin...” Timidly, Jupiter took a step towards the old man, whose dark memories took more and more possession of him.

“He lurked in the darkness. And he has taken her...” Suddenly Gabbin grabbed his ears and swayed his upper body back and forth. “Those screams... Oh, those horrible screams!”

Jupiter was increasingly gripped by a feeling that was otherwise completely foreign to him—Mr Gabbin felt overwhelmed. There was nothing he hated more than when a situation got out of its logical framework and he lost control over it. That was exactly what happened here. Strained, he looked down the hall, but there was nothing to be seen or heard from Mr Gabbin’s nephew.

Matthew Gabbin now seemed to have completely lost touch with reality. His gaze wandered, pointing to nowhere. “I know he’s still there, behind that dark window. Now and then, he glances out of it...”

Gradually, the First Investigator really began to deal with the fear. In the past few minutes, the conversation had gone completely out of hand. Energetically he tried to gather the last remnants of his power of concentration.

“Sir, what happened to your wife?” he finally asked.

But Gabbin had already turned away from him and now intoned a disturbing chant as he slowly shuffled away.

“Fly home, little sparrow, otherwise the white cat will find you...” One last time the old man turned to Jupiter with wide eyes and stretched out his trembling index finger. “Fly away and do not return, or it’ll eat you all in one piece...”

Jupiter made several more attempts to get any understandable information out of Mr Gabbin, but it was hopeless. The old man was impervious to any more questions. Finally, the First Investigator gave up and came back to the light of day.

Despite the late afternoon hour, the heat seemed to have increased even more, and sweat was running down his forehead. Unwillingly Jupiter had to think of the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, at the end of which the wicked witch died an agonizing death in her oven. It could not have been much hotter in there. While he was still thinking this gloomy thought, he wondered about himself. Such irrational feelings didn’t really suit him. Mr Gabbin’s disturbing words must have affected Jupiter more than he was prepared to admit.

Exhaling deeply, he wiped his brow and looked down the street. As he did so, he noticed a dilapidated house in the distance that aroused his interest. Long cracks ran through the walls and most of the windows were nailed up with planks.

When the First Investigator got nearer, he let his gaze wander over the run-down façade. This dump looked like a foreign body in the otherwise so neat image of Sheldon Street. But there was something else that puzzled him. He tilted his head while listening. There was some strange noise he couldn't identify. It was an unpleasant, constant hissing that seemed to come from inside the house. Once again Jupiter could not explain the sound, but he was suddenly overcome by the oppressive feeling that this sound was malignant. But before he could think more about it, the hissing stopped a second later. Just as he was about to shrug his shoulders, he suddenly heard a barely audible whisper.

"Hey..."

Jupiter hesitated and looked around. Did he only imagine that? He held his breath and listened.

"Hey..."

No doubt—someone had whispered. And it had come from inside the house. Hesitantly, he walked towards the door, which was a little open.

"Hello... who is this?" he asked irritated.

No answer came from the shadows behind the door. Was one of those gang members hiding there, maybe the sunglasses guy? Or the whole gang? Were they trying to lure him into the house to get back at him? Or was there something else behind it all? Mistrust and curiosity alternated at a rapid pace.

Jupiter frowned. If Pete were here now, he would definitely advise him not to put himself into a completely confusing and possibly dangerous situation. On the other hand, it was quite possible that he could learn something important from the strange whisperer. After a short hesitation, curiosity finally won over his suspicion and the First Investigator carefully pushed the door open.

Behind it was a small hallway, which was bathed in musty semi-darkness. To the left, a staircase led up. With a tense expression, Jupiter went inside, ready to make a quick retreat at any time. The interior of the house was as ramshackle as the exterior, and there was a hopeless mess of destroyed furniture, old leaves and trash.

"Hey..."

Startled, Jupiter flinched. It had come from the right side. The door was only ajar. He stepped closer cautiously. "Hello? Who is this?"

Again, no answer. The First Investigator looked around. Whoever was playing this game with him, Jupiter wanted to be prepared in case things got uncomfortable. After a moment's thought, he grabbed a wooden strut that had probably belonged to the banister in the past. He took two deep breaths, then slowly opened the worm-eaten living room door. There was a resistance. A soft, yielding, but clearly perceptible resistance. Jupiter looked down. After his eyes had become accustomed to the adverse light conditions, he realized that it was obviously the torn sleeve of a jacket.

"Hey..."

Reflexively, the First Investigator tore the improvised bat upwards. The whispering voice was heard in the immediate vicinity. Even the evil hissing suddenly came back again. Hastily he looked around in all directions.

There! At the other end of the room, in the shadow of a high shelf, stood someone. A scrawny figure with a shaggy, shaggy shock of hair, swaying his head back and forth

incessantly. His hand rested on a prehistoric radio that stood next to him on the shelf. Instead of music, only a ghastly interference hissing was coming out of the speakers.

Jupiter found it impossible to see details in the twilight. But he instinctively assumed he was dealing with a man. However, his features looked frightening flat and blunt, as if he had neither nose nor mouth.

A rhythmic moaning now mixed into the horrible hissing and the stranger's head twitched more and more violently back and forth. The initial surprise of the First Investigator had long since given way to real concern. Mr Gabbin's eerie chant still haunted his mind and blocked his powers of concentration. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't defuse this absurd situation with logic. Jupiter only knew one thing—he wanted to get out of here as quickly as possible.

Suddenly the figure broke free from its rigidity and stormed towards him with spider-like steps. Two wide open eyes stared at him over dirt blackened pavements.

“Hey!”

Without thinking, Jupiter spun around, dropped the wooden strut and ran off. For a brief but decisive moment, the shock robbed him of his orientation. Instead of turning left, he ran straight ahead towards the stairs. He had no choice—the only way out was to run up!

When he reached the first floor, he hurriedly ripped open the next best door and slammed it behind him as he ran in. The thick veil of dust he whirled up took his breath away. There was no lock on the door!

Coughing, he stumbled past a really tattered bed and through ghostly cobwebs towards another door. When he had almost reached it, it was pushed open from the other side.

What appeared was the stranger—with an angry look that made Jupiter stagger back. On the right hand of the ragged figure was an iron poker!

## 8. A Near Accident for Pete

Meanwhile, Bob had printed out a reasonably useful photo of the ghost pirate and set off on his Beetle.

He drove to the Rocky Beach Police Department. His visit with Inspector Cotta was as brief as possible. In the midst of incoming faxes and ringing phones, Cotta was clearly eager to get back to his work.

“Bob Andrews! Do you know what I have to tackle today?” Cotta barked.

“No, sir,” Bob replied.

“Graffiti! Of all things,” Cotta said. “There have been several cases of graffiti in recent days.”

“Yes,” Bob said. “I read about it in the papers as well.”

“What has this place come to? Sorry, Bob, but I cannot help you now, because some graffiti vandals are in town. You can leave me your photo. If I have time later, I’ll take a look at it.”

“Uh, okay...” Hesitantly, Bob put the printed photo with the pale man on his desk and left the office empty-handed.

After the failed interview with Mr Foley, Pete tried two other neighbours, again without success. No one wanted to talk to him about the past in general and the Prestons in particular. No sooner had the doors opened than they were slammed shut again.

Confused and worried, Pete walked towards Gabbin’s house to look for Jupiter. He stood outside the main door and there seemed to be no sound coming from the inside. He was unsure whether Jupiter was still in there but was also reluctant to knock.

Then he decided to walk further up the street to look.

Staggering back, Jupiter had stumbled over an overturned chair and fallen backwards onto the bed. He hastily pulled himself up and raised his hands defensively.

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir! I thought... someone had called me... so I came in. If it’s all right with you, I’ll be leaving now.”

“You’re not going anywhere until I give you permission,” growled the eerie homeless man, the lower half of whose face was completely covered with blackish plasters. Whether they really covered wounds or only served to make him unrecognizable was not clear.

“What do you want from me?” asked the First Investigator haltingly.

“Shut up and listen,” the man ordered, underlining his command with the threateningly raised poker. “I see that you and the other guy snooping around and knocking on people’s doors. This is not good!” He clenched his free hand into his fist. “I’ve been coming here to Sheldon Street for thirty years. People leave me alone because everybody here just mind their own business. And I want to keep it that way, okay?”

“I understand,” Jupiter replied hastily.

The man took another step closer and fixed his eyes on the First Investigator. “I hope so for your sake, wise guy. I can’t have annoying brats upsetting everyone and causing trouble

in this neighbourhood. Disturbance is attention, and I don't want attention. You'll end up bringing the cops down on me, and I won't be able to stay in this house. So grab the other kid and get out of here! Or else..." he bent over threateningly to Jupiter. "I'll show you what this poker is good for!"

With that, he turned around and stomped out the door. Jupiter remained stunned on the musty bed. It took him a few seconds to get a clear thought. But then he thought of the homeless man and his iron poker. He quickly jumped up, hurried down the creaking stairs and left the house without turning around again.

After a few minutes of unsuccessful search, Pete had realized that there is no point to go look for the First Investigator. He made his way back to his car. From across the street, he saw Jupiter was already back at the car waiting for him.

"Ah, there you are. I was going to—" Pete began to call out.

But just as Pete crossed the street, Jupiter saw a dark shadow racing from the corner of his eye and cried out in horror. "Look out! The motorbike!"

Pete jumped to the side and rolled away rudely. "Hey! Is he crazy?" But the vehicle had already roared away. Worried, Jupiter ran to his friend who was still lying on the ground.

"Pete! Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course!" the Second Investigator replied, gasping. "I lie here only for pleasure!" He rubbed his left elbow, moaning. "Oh man, tomorrow I'll probably be nothing but bruises."

Carefully Jupiter helped him to stand up. "Now get off the street."

Slowly Pete limped, supported by Jupiter, to the other side where they sat down on the sidewalk. Frowning, Jupiter looked at the site of the near-accident.

"Whoever it was accelerated at the exact moment you crossed the street."

"Sure, it was done on purpose! That guy had enough room! Could you see the rider's face?"

"Unfortunately, no. With the helmet and the black motorbike gear, his face was perfectly hidden. And the licence plate was covered with dirt." Jupiter rubbed the root of his nose while thinking. "In any case, he swerved to the left at the last moment. So it wasn't an accident attempt, but a drastic intimidation."

"Well, let's drink to that!" cried Pete sarcastically. "Should I do a somersault just because I almost got run over?"

"Certainly not. But at least this incident shows that we're actually onto something or someone."

Pete laughed grimly. "Oh, wonderful! That's the kind of insight that makes you want to be scraped off the pavement." He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. "I wonder if it was one of those gang members from earlier."

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. If so, then..." With amazing agility, Jupiter jumped up. "When I came back here, I saw someone looking into your car, or so it seemed. But the sun was so low that I could not see him clearly."

Pete lifted himself up moaning. "That better not have been one of those rascals sticking something in my exhaust pipe."

Hastily the two ran to the MG and looked around.

"No one here now," Jupiter noted.

"Could you tell if it was one person or more," Pete asked as he carefully searched the underbody of his car.

“I think only one. That could mean it wasn’t one of those bullies. On the other hand, who else would want something from your car?”

The Second Investigator stood up again. “There’s nothing wrong with the exhaust pipe. Nobody tampered with it.”

Jupiter sighed. “It’s all really very strange.”

## 9. Bob Researches

Bob got into his Beetle and rattled off the fastest way to Los Angeles. The roads were busy and his progress was slow. In this weather, everyone seemed to be shifting down a gear.

On his car radio, the news came on: “This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the news. The annual Golden Raven movie festival begins on Saturday in Los Angeles. The organizers expect numerous visitors and celebrities from all over the world. Governor Palmer will officially open the spectacle on Friday night... and the police are warning that traffic congestion is imminent.”

Bob puffed impatiently. “Sure, they have money for that, but they can’t do a proper street repair! Hey, what’s next?”

On entering Los Angeles, Bob could see large posters everywhere featuring the legendary Golden Raven event that had been held once a year for generations. This event attracted all Hollywood greats and celebrities from all over the world as well as countless press representatives to the city. During the five days leading up to the opening on Friday night, Los Angeles was in a state of chaos.

After more than an hour, Bob had finally reached the skyscraper that also housed the office of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Bob took the lift down to one of the two basement floors. Here, in a huge basement room, was the archives, where all the years of the *Los Angeles Times* were stored, as well as the editors’ files. Many newspapers were bound in thick, large-format volumes, others lay in stacks on the high shelves. The collection was invaluable.

Bob had been here many times before, but each time he felt as if he was entering a world of his own. It was a cool, dark cave where the knowledge of many generations spanning over a hundred years was stored. This was the realm of Mrs Grayson, who ran the archives, meticulously recorded the holdings and had been busy for years having old issues photographed and digitized. The newsprint consisted of low-quality fibres that slowly decomposed over the course of a few decades. Therefore, the newspapers were photographed on microfilm and from then on only these copies were used to preserve the originals.

As Bob entered, the archivist looked up from her desk and took off her reading glasses.

“Hello, Mrs Grayson,” Bob greeted her, closing the steel door behind him so that the warmer and more humid outside air would not affect the room climate that was attuned to the archives.

“Bob Andrews of The Three Investigators!” Mrs Grayson called out. “How nice of you to drop by! How can I help you?”

In a few words, Bob explained what he was looking for—newspaper reports in the month of May twenty-seven years ago. If this vintage of newspapers had not yet been digitized, there were only two possibilities—either Mrs Grayson would hand him some heavy volumes or he would have to use the big, old-fashioned-looking microfilm reader.

“You are lucky that I have the microfilms of that year,” the archivist said with a smile.

“Why? I thought they were always here with you.”

“Normally, yes,” Mrs Grayson replied. “But even we down here have to keep up with the times. Hardly any journalists bother to go through a pile of microfilms any more.”

Bob suspected that was exactly what was in store for him.

"Today, everyone wants to do research on their own computer, preferably online and with full text search. That's why the newspaper had decided to have the entire microfilm stock digitized," Mrs Grayson explained. "Well, at the moment we are in the process of capturing the issues from twenty-four years ago. But to do that we have to send the microfilms to a lab where the film is then scanned page by page and stored. As I said, you are lucky that the archives from the year you are looking for are still here..."

Mrs Grayson led him to a shelf where there were numerous small boxes. In each box was a reel of microfilm with about two months of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Bob puffed out his cheeks. The only clue was from Mrs Sullivan's memory of something that possibly happened at Sheldon Street which resulted in her family shifting out. Bob realized that an extensive search of reports could hardly be avoided, but he had engaged in such efforts many times at both the newspaper archives and the library.

"You would be even luckier if these microfilms were already digitized," Mrs Grayson said, "but I guess you'll have to make do with these microfilms." She handed Bob two boxes and led him through a fire door into the next room where the readers were.

Bob took out a reel of film. In his mind, he already saw the countless tiny frames. Image files and full text would really be more comfortable, he thought. But that was not what mattered in an archive. Because to be able to read digitized texts, one needed a computer and the right software. Besides, who could seriously guarantee that a CD-ROM or DVD would still be usable in a hundred years' time? How often had Jupiter cursed when one of his old floppy disks or CDs reported a read error! These microfilms were small and somewhat unwieldy, but even in thousands of years, one might still be able to read them with a magnifying glass.

The clunky device that Mrs Grayson had switched on served the same purpose. To Bob, it looked like a cross between a microscope and a film projector. He sat down, slid the spool onto the left axle and threaded the beginning of the microfilm through the machine's gears. A few turns later, he noticed that the image was displayed upside down on the large screen. "I'll never learn!" he sighed, rewound the film and repeated the insertion procedure.

Mrs Grayson patted Bob on the back and wished him good luck. "I'll leave you to this. I'm going to get some fresh air for a few minutes."

"Thank you, you are a help—priceless."

"Well—like the treasures of this archive." Smiling, Mrs Grayson acknowledged the compliment and left Bob alone.

Bob nervously operated the switches. The film ran forward in irregular jumps. Meticulously, he searched the jumble of articles on the monitor for the first report on the fire at the school. "I have to be systematic," Bob said to himself. "If there were any news about Sheldon Street, it had to be on the local section of Rocky Beach."

Despite spending more than three hours searching, he couldn't find anything useful.

Meanwhile, Jupiter and Pete had got back into the MG and Pete drove back.

Jupiter found it difficult to concentrate, however. Again and again the words of old Mr Gabbin and the sinister encounter with the homeless man went through his mind. Silently he listened to what Pete had to tell him about his enquiries. He shook his head with trepidation.

"Fear, fear everywhere... Everyone around house number 81 is scared of the Prestons. Or no, not the Prestons themselves, but someone or something they know about the forest cabin."

“So the ghost pirate.” Pete had tension written all over his face.

The First Investigator let his gaze wander into the distance. “Evil dwells in that cabin...”

Irritated, his friend looked at him. “Huh?”

“... Otherwise the white cat will find you...” It was just a low murmur, but Pete had understood every word.

“Jupiter Jones, you are the most rational person I have ever met on this earth, you know that,” Pete remarked, “but I’m getting really scared of you! You look like there’s actually some kind of monster around.”

“Sorry, Pete.” The First Investigator’s gaze became clear again. “I must admit, I’ve been rather shaken by recent events.” He exhaled deeply. “Nevertheless, you are right, of course. We must try to continue our investigation with the necessary reasonableness, without being blinded by its phantasmagorical tendencies.”

Pete smiled in relief. “That sounds more like our Jupiter Jones. So... back to analysis!”

“All right, let’s consider the facts. There is fear and silence on Sheldon Street. And this is despite the fact that our only clue to this mystery, namely the film clip with the ghost pirate, is twenty-seven years old. The question is: ‘Who or what would be able to intimidate an entire street so much that even after almost three decades, no one wants to talk about it?’”

“Not wanting to talk about it is one thing,” Pete replied, “but these people react fiercely just because we’re asking around a little...”

“An additional question: ‘How did this stranger on a motorbike even find out so quickly that we on to something?’” Juve asked. “The Sheldon Street case is only a few hours old. So where did this person get this information?”

Pete scratched thoughtfully behind his ear. “Well, Mrs Sullivan is definitely out. She’s the one who gave us the job. How about that guy Dawson? But that wouldn’t make any sense. He’s after the projector, not us.”

“Right. Logically, that leaves only one Sheldon Street resident. At least we were there long enough to give someone time to change and get on their motorbike.”

The Second Investigator hesitated in surprise. “You mean that was one of our interviewees?”

“It’s only natural,” Jupiter said. “So back to the residents of Sheldon Street. We can definitely rule out Mr Gabbin. The man is too old to be speeding around on a motorbike.”

“Miss Tomkins is out too,” Pete added. “She’s barely one-fifty and has a figure like Danny DeVito. She’d need a ladder to get on a motorbike.”

Jupiter narrowed his eyes and waited to see if his colleague would make another snide remark.

When Pete noticed the ambiguity of his words, he grinned widely. “Excuse me, Juve—of course people without ideal dimensions can also be excellent motorcyclists. But our mystery man definitely had a different figure from Miss Tomkins.”

Even the First Investigator had to grin now. “It’s all right. Let’s cross Madam DeVito off our suspect list.”

Broodingly Pete tapped against the side window. “Maybe it was the robe guy, that Mr Foley. He had this strange sparkle in his eyes. Or maybe it was one of those gang members. That curly-haired gorilla looked violent enough.” He sighed. “Somehow, we’re not getting anywhere. After all, there must have been dozens of other people watching us...”

Fifteen minutes later, Pete reached the salvage yard. He carefully steered his MG past a bulldozer. Several days ago, a construction company had already torn up the road surface

right in front of the entrance to The Jones Salvage Yard.

When they went into Headquarters, Bob was not there.

“How about we wait for Bob to come back and get on with our case,” Jupiter said.

“Not for me, Jupe,” Pete argued. “It is way too hot in here... besides I should go home as soon as possible to treat my wounds. How about we meet tomorrow?”

“Okay, we should do just that,” Jupe agreed. “I’ll send an SMS to Bob to ask him to come here tomorrow morning at 9 am, and then we will continue with our discussion.”

“Fine,” Pete said. “See you tomorrow!” With that, Pete left Headquarters.

## 10. War Council

The next morning, Jupiter and Pete were already at Headquarters before 9 am. Pete switched on the radio and the weather report came on: “This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. In Southern California, excessive heat warning remains in effect for today. Afternoon highs will range from 34 degrees Celsius at the coast, 36 near the bay, and 38 in the inland areas. However for tomorrow, thunderstorms, rain and damaging winds with peak gusts up to 120 km/h are forecast to hit most of Southern California from early morning till mid-afternoon. This will be followed by a breezy and cooler pattern on Saturday which will continue into the middle of next week.”

Then the door opened and Bob entered the trailer. “Hey, what do you look like, Pete?” he remarked when he saw Pete’s bandaged arm. “Did you fall in a pit?”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Pete replied as he squeezed himself out of the MG, moaning. “I almost got knocked down by a mad motorcyclist!”

Bob’s eyes were open. “Someone tried to run over you?”

“The accident attempt would certainly be too ambitious,” Jupiter rejoiced. “It was more of a warning.”

“A clear warning, you could say!” Pete growled angrily. “When I get my hands on him —”

“So that means that someone has become aware of our investigations and now wants to stop us from proceeding,” Bob concluded. “Do you already have a suspicion?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Nothing. Except for the frail Mr Gabbin and a lady of striking stature, the entire population of Sheldon Street would be eligible. Very odd people, there’s no other word for it.”

“Above all, very secretive,” Pete added. “In my interviews, I have found only one thing—nobody wants to say a word about the Prestons or about events from that time. Everyone seems to be terrified of something.”

“Obviously. That doesn’t really get us any further...” Bob turned to Jupiter. “And how did it go with you?”

“Similar. I was completely focused on Mr Gabbin. He, too, went completely bonkers over the Preston cue. First he dragged me into the house so nobody would hear us, and then...” He looked uncertainly at his hands as if they could make what had happened more understandable.

Bob looked at him, irritated. “If I didn’t know that the intrepid mystery hunter Jupiter Jones was standing in front of me, I’d think that old man scared you.”

“To a certain extent, he actually did. At first, he seemed disturbed, but then he lost touch with reality more and more,” Jupiter said. “He then went completely out of his mind, and said crazy stuff—a horrible figure in a forest cabin and a bird-eating white cat.”

Bob stroked his sweaty hair thoughtfully. “Crazy... sounds almost as if there’s actually something to our ghost pirate.”

“Hopefully you can tell us more about that,” Pete replied. “How did it go with Cotta?”

“My visit to the police department lasted about twenty seconds because he was up to his ears in work,” Bob replied. “I left him the photo printout, but he’ll take a while to get a good

look at it.”

“Well, apparently there are other cases to solve in Rocky Beach,” the First Investigator stated. “I guess we’ll have to be patient.”

“I did some more checks on the Internet... but without success,” Bob reported. “Then I had the idea to send out an enquiry on the ghost pirate using our trusted Ghost-to-Ghost email Hookup.”

“A fabulous idea!” Jupiter praised.

The Ghost-to-Ghost e-mail Hookup was a further development of their original Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup which employed telephone calls. In the e-mail version, The Three Investigators would send an e-mail to some of their friends requesting certain information. In this case, they would be attaching image files of the ghost pirate, asking them for information, otherwise, the recipient was requested to forward the message to as many friends as possible. Within a very short time, the request could reach many people, and it usually would not take long for one or even several of them to get back to The Three Investigators.

“Unfortunately, the most fabulous idea is of no use if it doesn’t lead to a result,” Bob replied with a sigh. “Anyway, the yield so far is rather meagre.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

“Here I printed out the first few responses. See for yourself.” He passed the paper to Jupiter who read it together with Pete. It said:

*Hello Bob,*

*Cool picture!!! That guy’s a scream. My brother has a Halloween mask that looks almost exactly like that—but with horns. Does that work for you?*

*Many greetings!  
Dustin*

*Hi Bob,*

*I can’t help you there. I’ve never met this man. And by the looks of him, I’m glad about it. Are you sure there’s nothing wrong with the colours? This photo seems strange to me.*

*If I find out anything else, I’ll be in touch.*

*Best regards, also to Pete and Jupe!  
Jeffrey*

*Hello Mr Andrews,*

*I hereby expressly forbid you to send my son such ghastly horror pictures. He read your mail earlier and now he keeps telling me that he has to help catch a ‘monster man’. You think that’s funny? It may be that your dubious detective agency is dealing with some kind of ghost hoax, but please don’t bother our children with it!*

*P. Voorhees*

“Wow, somebody got annoyed,” Pete commented on the strong complaint. “Fancy that, this chap’s name is Voorhees! Is it for real?”

Suddenly, Bob’s gaze fell on the calendar above the table. He stared at it as if spellbound, which his two friends also noticed.

“What’s wrong?” Jupe asked.

“I just noticed something else entirely!”

“What?” Pete asked.

“The calendar, Pete! Today is Thursday the 12th!”

The Second Investigator sat bolt upright and looked at Bob with feigned bewilderment. “Razor-sharp observation, Bob!”

“Yeah... well no... I mean... tomorrow is Friday—Friday the 13th!”

“What are you getting at?” Jupiter suspected that Bob must have discovered some important detail.

“Nothing! Just the name ‘Voorhees’ and the date—a pure coincidence, I’m sure. Not everyone understands our ‘ghost hoax’,” Bob added amusedly. “But it gets more absurd.”

*Hey, you jokers!*

*Who’s that supposed to be? Nick Fury with rabies? I have a tip for you. Have a look at the comic books!*

*Greetings,  
Russell*

Jupiter paused, irritated. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Someone wants to be very clever,” the Second Investigator explained. “Nick Fury is that comic book character with the eye patch.”

“The answer here goes in a similar direction,” Bob explained, pointing to the next e-mail:

*Ahoy, landlubber!*

*What a fancy picture of my dear pirate companion Ragetti! We lost him on our last booze cruise on Tortuga and were already worried. Please send him on the next steamer to Port Royal. All right so far?*

*Sincerely,  
Captain Sparrow,  
Caribbean*

Jupiter smiled grimly. “Some people think they’re really funny...”

“This eye patch is a real eye-catcher,” Pete said. “But maybe later there’ll be a real clue.”

“Let’s hope so,” Bob replied. “Today really does seem like a crazy—”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed unmistakably across the salvage yard.

“Pete! Bob! Come out now!”

Jupe groaned. “Not now! That’s gotta be work for us.”

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “You got to be joking—in this weather?”

“Wait,” Jupe said. “I’ll go out and see what she wants.” With that, he alone went out the trailer and to the Cold Gate. As he stepped out into the salvage yard, he felt the extreme heat. Aunt Mathilda was standing a short distance away.

Back in the trailer, Pete suggested: “How about we get out through Green Gate One now and run away? This is not the time for work!”

“Anyway, you can’t do much with your bandaged arm,” Bob remarked.

A short while later, Jupe returned. “Bad news, fellas!” he said. “Aunt Mathilda wants us to help Uncle Titus to make the salvage yard as storm-proof as possible for tomorrow’s severe thunderstorm.”

“No!” Pete exclaimed. “Not with my injuries.”

“You’re right Pete, you might as well go home and rest while Bob and I have to slog it off outside. Anyway, I guess we have no choice but to put our investigation on hold,” Jupe decided. “Bob, I suggest we get the work done as fast as possible so that we can continue.”

Dejected, Jupe and Bob ventured out of Headquarters while Pete went home. However, Jupiter’s plan to do the work fast did not materialize. They could not continue working in long stretches. In fact, they had to take regular breaks to get out of the heat as well as to keep themselves fully hydrated. Eventually, they took turns to go out.

Jupe and Bob slaved in the sun, carrying cartons and boxes into the storeroom. Then they had to secure the canopy, under which were kept the more valuable things. They stopped for lunch, and then continued working.

Finally, they finished the work and were sitting at the verandah of the salvage yard office fully exhausted while being pampered by Aunt Mathilda with cherry pie and orange juice. By then, it was late evening and the heat had subsided.

## 11. At the Haunted Cabin

The Three Investigators arranged to meet back later. Pete, especially, rested at home comfortably while his friends sweated it out at the salvage yard. At half past ten, Pete returned to Headquarters and he was also the last one to arrive. His friends looked at him curiously.

“Well, back on the job?” Jupiter pointed to the comfortable chair into which Pete instantly plumped.

“All right,” Moaning, Pete brushed over his ribs. “I’m going to have some of my bruises for a while anyway—look!” He rolled up his T-shirt, under which numerous bruises and green spots appeared. “Nice and colourful, huh?”

“However,” Jupiter sympathetically confirmed. “If we put you in a picture frame, you’d pass for abstract art.”

“How comforting... Well, climbing walls or jumping fences is out for the time being.” Bob grinned broadly. “No problem. We’ll just switch areas of expertise. You do the research, I’ll do the logical deductions and Jupe will do all the fighting and climbing from here on.”

“Yes, exactly,” replied the First Investigator. “And on top of that, I’ll run the Humour Department... which is severely under-performing.”

Impatiently, Pete tugged his shirt back into place. “Can we get back to our case now?”

“Well, Inspector Cotta hasn’t contacted us yet and Dad couldn’t help me either.” Bob sighed. “I guess a blurry photo isn’t going to be enough after all.”

“Tough luck,” Pete shrugged, “but things can’t always go smoothly.”

“Smooth is not the word.” Lost in thought, Jupiter tugged at a rubber band. “Rather rough like a gravel road...”

“And you now assume that the woman on the video clip is the wife of this Mr Crabbin?” Bob enquired.

“Gabbins,” Jupiter corrected him. “At least it would be possible. If his statements are to be believed, something terrible has happened in that forest cabin. But the film is not yet conclusive proof.” He pointed to a map of Rocky Beach. “To get the full picture, I suggest we go to the forest cabin in Sheldon Forest. I called Mrs Sullivan earlier and had her give me a detailed route description.”

“Great, entering a creepy haunted cabin in the middle of the night,” mumbled Pete nervously.

With a broad smile, Jupiter turned to him. “Oh, Pete, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for a long time. In all this time, was there ever a single case that you didn’t find dangerous, scary or otherwise unacceptable?”

“Of course, yes,” Pete replied angrily, “I already know the number. Pete is a scaredy-cat—always the same old story. Couldn’t it be that I’m just the only one of us three with a healthy instinct for idiotic risks?”

“Don’t bicker,” Bob tried to convey. “After all, the division of labour has always worked out very well—Jupiter has a foolhardy plan, Pete thinks it’s crazy and wants to quit, and I walk behind, shaking my head and write all this stuff down later.”

The First Investigator grinned mischievously. "A little abbreviated, but essentially correct."

At this moment, Pete's face suddenly brightened. "Believe it or not, I'd really love to go on a nightly ghost hunt with you, but..." he pointed to his sprained foot. "I'd just be an unnecessary burden for you in the forest. You agree, don't you?"

In fake concern, Jupiter tapped him on the knee. "Absolutely. It would be downright irresponsible to let you leave without a stretcher and a nurse!"

"Hey, that's no excuse!" Pete exclaimed. "Look at my ankle—it's almost as thick as a pineapple!"

"... And before it swells up to the size of a watermelon, you should definitely take it easy," Bob agreed with a broad grin. "In the meantime, you can take care of Mrs Sullivan's two boxes. You won't need your badly injured foot for that."

"Okay, I will." Pete beamed with relief. "Well, good luck, fellas. And don't let the ghost pirate get you."

When Bob and Jupiter arrived at Sheldon Street, it was pitch dark. To avoid attracting attention, Bob parked the Beetle at one end of the street.

Barely five minutes later, the two investigators were standing in front of house number 81, sneaking as inconspicuously and quietly as possible past a high hedge into the overgrown garden. Then they entered the dark foothills of Sheldon Forest. The already weak light of the narrow crescent moon was immediately swallowed by the pitch-dark canopy of leaves. After they had groped their way a few metres ahead, Bob tapped the First Investigator on the shoulder.

"Don't you think we can finally turn on the flashlights now? Or do you enjoy stumbling blindly through the undergrowth in total darkness..."

"Just a moment," Jupiter replied in a whisper. "First we have to make sure that no one notices us." Two minutes later, he pulled out his flashlight. "Well, we shouldn't be visible from the houses now."

"Absolutely not," Bob agreed with him. "We'll be lucky if we can still see ourselves..."

"Well then, let there be light!" Jupiter said. Bob also switched on his flashlight. After his eyes got used to the sudden brightness, he got a first all-round view.

"That's more like it..." Jupiter continued. "If Mrs Sullivan's memory is correct, we should be looking at the two big brown stones... and from there, it is only about a hundred metres stubbornly straight on to the forest cabin."

"Let's hope she's right," Bob remarked. "It's not that inviting here..."

Silently the two of them fought their way through the dense branches of the pines and coastal oaks until Bob suddenly stopped. "Pull over for a second!"

Surprised, Jupiter turned around. "What is it? Why should we—"

"Keep quiet for once," Bob interrupted him. He listened intently into the silence. "No, nothing..."

Jupiter shook his head without understanding. "What is there?"

"I thought I heard footsteps behind us. But it sounded like footsteps."

"Don't lose your nerve, else you will compete with Pete!"

"I'm sure there was something there," Bob defended himself. "It cracked as if something was moving behind us."

"Well, whatever it was, it's obviously gone now," Jupe said. "Let's move on."

“My, my, and all this on the night before Friday the 13th...” Disgruntled, Bob trotted after the First Investigator.

For a while, the two boys continued to grope their way through the unruly undergrowth. Then the cone of light from Jupiter’s flashlight suddenly fell on the open area of a small clearing, in the middle of which a dark building rose up.

As expected the main door was locked. Although they had Pete’s lock pick set with them, Jupiter first wanted to check whether they could gain access by other means. They walked silently along the solid wooden façade. There they had the eerie feeling that the house was staring down at them with blind, evil eyes. At the back, they finally discovered a door that could be pushed open with their combined strength. With bated breath, they entered the haunted cabin.

“So we’re in,” Jupiter noted with satisfaction, “without using the lock picks.”

Excited, the First Investigator let the beam of his flashlight wander through the room and over the dust-covered furniture. He was almost surprised that he didn’t see any mice or rats fleeing from them.

In general, it was surprisingly quiet. No matter how hard he listened, absolutely nothing could be heard. No stray dog snarling and jumping up from the moth-eaten carpet to chase away the intruders; no dishevelled cats creeping around in the twisting shadows of the furniture ruins; and also no night birds calling out from the roof beams. It was downright dead quiet.

“I didn’t think the cabin was so huge,” Bob marvelled as he hesitantly looked around. “I mean, you could... Aaaargh!”

Jupiter flinched. “Heavens, you scared me! What is it?”

“That shadow over there!” Shocked, Bob pointed across the room. “There’s something over there!”

## 12. The Night Intruder

Jupiter paused for a short moment. Then he exhaled with a hiss. “Oh, man. Get a grip, Bob.” And with energetic steps, he stomped off.

Bob stared after him in disbelief. “What... what are you doing?”

But Jupiter grumbled only half-loudly to himself as he walked past the staircase directly towards the huge shadow that stood in the opposite corner of the room. Then the First Investigator pointed his flashlight at the enormous figure with an exaggeratedly deep bow.

“May I introduce to you, a Grizzly Bear!” Jupe said. “Upright about two metres forty tall, expertly stuffed and guaranteed not to roar!”

“It’s all right,” Bob replied sheepishly. “I’d forgotten we are in a hunting lodge.”

Jupiter sighed and let the beam of his flashlight shine over two antelopes and a tooth-fluttering panther. “Obviously, the former owner has taken part in several safaris... This place is full of trophies from all over the world.”

“This is horrible...” Bob remarked with unease.

Even the First Investigator was not comfortable in his skin. “Undoubtedly... nevertheless, we have a job to do. With a little luck, we may find something here that will bring us closer to solving our mystery. So, let’s go search for it!”

At the same time, Pete was sitting in the stuffy Headquarters examining the contents of the two boxes. He was completely exhausted from the sorting work and could hardly resist the urge to just sit back and close his eyes. Unwillingly he reached for the next object.

“And this one? A rusty pocket watch, a book of historic coins, old letters,” he mumbled to himself.

Again he had to yawn, but suddenly his gaze caught on a photograph. It showed a friendly smiling older man. From other photos, Pete knew that it was Tanya Sullivan’s grandfather, Desmond Kane. He stood waving in front of an extensive green area, behind him several strangely trimmed bushes could be seen. The Second Investigator thought he recognized four letters in them—E, N, A, V. In the background, an imposing building with a huge window front rose into the sky. But because of the incident sunlight, nothing could be seen behind the reflecting panes. On the back of the photo was a single sentence in sweeping handwriting: ‘The wings of the goose guard happiness.’

The Second Investigator frowned. What was that all about? Shrugging, he took a green folder and put the photo inside for later examination.

Just as he was about to proceed with the examination of the contents of the folder, he heard a noise coming from the main gate of the salvage yard. It was very quiet at that time and there were no cars passing on the street. It sounded like somebody was rattling at the lock.

Pete lay still and listened. The noise was something that should not be there at this time of the day. Then he stood up and took a look through ‘See-All’—the periscope built from old stove pipes and mirrors that led up through the roof of the trailer. This device enabled them to look over the piled-up junk and scan the area in the salvage yard around their trailer.

However, when he aimed the periscope at the main gate, he couldn't see a thing as there was a stack of tyres blocking the view.

Pete heard the rattling a few more times. There had to be someone just outside the gate tampering with the lock. He kept looking through 'See-All' around the stack of tyres. The dim light coming from the street lamps was sufficient for him to see if there was any other movement. At the same time, he was thinking hard about what to do in case the intruder broke through and came in.

Then the rattling stopped. The intruder perhaps realized that he could not open the lock, and gave up trying.

For a few seconds, it was completely silent, only the distant roar of the ocean could be heard. Suddenly, Pete saw a figure at the top of the fence next to the main gate. Having failed to break the lock, he decided to climb over the fence. The intruder looked around briefly and then jumped to the ground.

Pete held his breath and aimed the periscope at the intruder who looked around and then crept across the yard.

As the intruder came nearer, Pete almost fell backwards in shock. "What?" Pete exclaimed in alarm. The intruder was wearing an eye patch and his skin was white as a dead man's face! Not only that, he had a bolt cutter with him.

Now Pete had to act. With his sore ankle, he couldn't go out and confront the intruder. Then he had a plan. He remembered that Jupiter had tinkled with several items last week—items that could possibly allow him to thwart the intruder.

Immediately, Pete opened a hidden trapdoor on the trailer floor revealing Tunnel Two—a secret passage leading from the trailer out to Jupiter's open-air workshop. The tunnel was a corrugated iron tube lined inside with rags and old pieces of carpet.

When Pete crawled out of the tunnel into the workshop which was hidden from the yard by some cleverly placed bedsteads. On the work bench, he saw a couple of spotlights and a megaphone. He hoped that Jupiter had finished repairing them.

Pete quickly positioned two of the spotlights against the bedsteads and pointing out towards Uncle Titus's storeroom. He sensed that there was where the intruder was heading. True enough, the next moment, he heard a rattling sound at the storeroom door.

Armed with the megaphone on one hand, Pete plugged in the spotlights and switched them on. Immediately, the bright light shone towards the storeroom, and Pete held up the megaphone and yelled on it: "Hey! You there! What are you doing here?"

Pete scrambled on a chair and looked over the bedsteads. He saw the intruder running away. Despite his sore ankle, Pete quickly climbed over the bedstead and dropped on the other side. He crept forward and just in time, he saw the intruder running to the part of the fence where he had climbed in from.

Pete contemplated pursuing, but the intruder was faster and effortlessly swung himself over the fence. The Second Investigator heard him landing awkwardly at the other side, stumbled a few steps, and then ran down the street.

Pete hobbled to the main gate hoping to catch a glimpse of the intruder but was just in time to see him running across the street towards the coastal road.

Meanwhile, Bob and Jupiter had been inspecting one room to another in the eerie forest cabin. A pervasive smell of damp wood, rat droppings and rotting leaves was in the air. The neglected rooms gave the impression that no one had been here for many years. With every movement, countless cobwebs swayed back and forth, as if the building itself was alive.

“Judging by the finger-thick dust, this cabin has indeed been uninhabited for a long time otherwise you should be able to see clear traces,” Jupiter noted.

“Pete would now object that this only applies to human inhabitants,” Bob replied with a faint smile. “After all, ghosts don’t leave traces.”

Then they entered the last room. “This seems to have been the bedroom in the past,” Jupiter noted.

Bottles were everywhere, cigarette butts lay on the floor and the walls were smeared. At one corner was an old, broken-down bed with a stained mattress. Next to it was a large dresser.

Bob carefully pulled out each drawer and found that they were empty. When he knelt down in to check underneath the dresser and lit the floor with his flashlight, something suddenly shone up.

“Helloooo... What have we here?” He pushed the dresser aside a little and picked up a small object. “A ring...”

Curious Jupiter bent down to him. “A ring? Let me see.”

“Here... I found this under the dresser.” Bob said. “I’m sure it fell behind it.”

The First Investigator also got down on his knees to examine the find more closely. “Hmm... A silver signet ring. The seal itself looks like a setting sun with wavy rays. And this?” He held the ring closer to his eyes. “There’s a small number engraved inside.”

“You mean the number that indicates the purity of silver?” Bob wondered.

“No, the alloy stamp is to the right. The number here has a completely different shape and is considerably larger. It looks like a curved seven.”

With a satisfied smile, Jupiter put the ring in his pocket and straightened up again. “Well, that’s something. I bet you don’t get a ring this unusual by mail order. With a little luck—”

A muffled noise made him jump. Jupiter looked at his colleague with uncertainty. “What was that?”

Bob listened into the silence. “Now everything is quiet again,” he whispered.

“Maybe it was just the wind,” Jupe said.

“I didn’t notice any wind earlier,” Bob said, “besides, it sounded different.”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “Don’t you start with that creepy talk again. I’m willing to bet that —” Once again, they heard a short, shuffling noise coming from the outside.

Bob took a few steps to the door and looked out. “It sounds as if there’s someone just outside the main door!” he whispered.

Again a deep creaking sound could be heard. From one second to the next, the nerves of the two investigators were strained to breaking point.

“You... are right,” breathed Jupiter. “Those are definitely footsteps!”

Bob looked around frantically. “If someone comes in from the main door, our only way out is the back door—the way we came in.”

The shuffling steps could be heard much clearer now.

“I think he’s going to the back door now,” Jupiter noted. To him it all seemed as unreal as a bad dream. But a look into Bob’s horrified face made it painfully clear to him that they were dealing with reality.

“Where did he come from?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know, but if...” The First Investigator paused in bewilderment when he realized what was happening—he could hear the back door opening. “Oh no, I think he is coming in!”

“We’re trapped!” Bob gasped hoarsely. “This... This can’t be happening.”

“Not necessarily,” Jupe whispered. “I have a plan.” He quickly closed the door and managed to lock it from the inside. However, the door knob was wobbly. “Bob, find

something to jam the door so that it will not open.”

Bob found some pieces of wood and began jamming them into the gap at the bottom of the door. Meanwhile, Jupe ran to the window and inspected it.

“No grilles. Wonderful!” Jupiter whispered. “Here’s my plan... when the intruder comes in and tries to open the door, we open the window and escape through it.”

Just a few seconds later, they heard the back door open. That was followed by eerie footsteps inexorably approaching the rooms. One by one the room doors were opened. Then, the footsteps had stopped in front of the bedroom, and in the resulting silence, a rattling, fearsome gasp could now be heard.

“He’s right outside the door!” Bob breathed with eyes wide open. The inhuman wheezing had now turned into a deep growl.

At that very moment, Jupe opened the window. “Now!” he whispered, stepped up to the ledge and leapt out. Bob followed next, and both of them ran to hide behind some bushes.

From there, they could hear the intruder ramming against the jammed door. A few seconds later, the ramming had ceased.

Immediately the First Investigator was back in charge. “We can’t see him now. Besides, he might be armed. Maybe we can get a look at the intruder from a safe distance! See if we can get to the back door.”

By the time they crept nearer to the back door, there was no more sound from inside the cabin. Bob listened intently. “The guy must’ve gone out by now.”

Sighing, Jupiter said: “It is difficult to track a person at night in the forest.”

“I don’t get it,” Bob muttered confusedly. “What is going on here? How did that person know we are here? Would it be that he was following us all along?”

Carefully, the First Investigator groped for the ring in his trouser pocket. “I, too, would feel much better if I had an answer to your questions...”

Bob stared at his friend. “What if there is something to these ghost stories after all? No sane person would be roaming around an abandoned forest cabin in the middle of the night!”

“The two of us are proving the opposite, aren’t we?” Jupiter replied gruffly. Under no circumstances did he want to let the reins of logic tear out of his hands again. “So stop this nonsense! We must not go crazy now.”

“You can talk! We are only here because something terrible happened in this haunted cabin back then. And I think the same thing is happening to us now!”

“Rubbish!” hissed the First Investigator. “Bob, there are no ghosts!”

Jupiter was firmly convinced that they were not dealing with a supernatural creature. Yet his demonstrative courage was more feigned than real. There was a good reason for this— whoever came into the cabin, he was undoubtedly after them!

A little later, the two of them made their way out of the forest. Again and again, they paused and listened if anyone was following them, but everything remained calm. The eerie intruder from the forest cabin had disappeared.

At Headquarters, Pete received his colleagues, telling them his horror experience. Jupiter and Bob listened stunned to their friend’s description of the intruder with the eye-patch and a dead man’s face.

“The ghost pirate came here?” Bob couldn’t believe his ears.

“I’m telling you,” Pete confirmed.

“Guys, enough with all this ghost stuff!” Jupiter demanded angrily. “Neither here nor in the forest cabin are there any haunting by ghosts, but absolutely earthly contemporaries!”

Bob stroked his forehead. Since their return, he had been plagued by persistent headaches. "But what's this all about?"

"That's what we have to figure out." Yawning, Jupiter looked at his watch. "It's 12:30 am. Friends, let's postpone further investigations until tomorrow. After today, I think we could all use a little sleep. But before that, I'll check around the yard again. By the way," He looked over to Bob. "Where is the projector?"

"It is well-hidden underneath the table in the crime lab."

A smile flitted across Jupiter's tired face. "I'll bring it into the house for safekeeping tonight. Well then, fellas, good night and sweet dreams."

Pete waved. "I already know what I'll dream tonight."

### 13. Friday the 13th

On Friday morning, a severe storm had hit southwest California with squalls and heavy rain showers. The Californian sky was as cloudy as the mood of The Three Investigators.

As they entered Headquarters and fought their way out of their well-tied rain jackets, the storm was still raging. The weather forecast had been correct as there were severe thunderstorms and the harbingers could hardly be ignored even inside their headquarters.

Pete switched on the radio in time for the weather report: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. Los Angeles. Severe thunderstorms has pummelled Southern California with damaging winds and heavy rain. Since the morning hours, several parts of the state have been experiencing torrential rain and wind at speeds of up to 130 km/h. A major landslide has occurred near Rocky Beach, causing minor injuries to three people."

"Man, this is one big storm." The Second Investigator massaged his aching ribs. "Somewhere it must have hit hard too. I almost sailed down the stairs when I heard that thunder."

"At least, after all the heat from the past week, the storm's a good thing after all," Bob said.

"But it could do much damage," sighed Jupiter as he looked suspiciously at a dripping spot on the ceiling. "Look at that leak!"

Annoyed, Jupiter rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a roll of duct tape. He then climbed onto a chair and frantically tried to seal the small leak in the roof of their trailer.

Sceptically, Bob watched as the face colour of the First Investigator changed a little more to dark red with each additional strip of insulating tape. "Jupe, when are you going to weld a metal sheet on the roof?" he asked. "You've been wanting to do that for a long time."

"Yes, Bob, I know how long this has been on my list." Jupiter puffed. "I'll do it when the rain stops, but now, we better get on with our case."

"Absolutely," Bob replied, winking as he opened his Thermos flask and poured three cups of hot tea.

"You are too kind." Suspiciously Jupiter checked the tape's adhesive strength and, as a precaution, placed a large cooking pot under the leak. Then, exhausted, he let himself sink into an armchair.

"But now back to our case. Pete, you said earlier that you discovered a strange photograph yesterday."

"Exactly," Pete confirmed and pulled out the green folder. "That is... what was written on the back that's weird." He gave the photo to Jupiter, who, after a quick glance, passed it on to Bob.

"The wings of the goose guard happiness?" Bob murmured. "Pretty weird, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Jupiter agreed and picked up the phone. "But maybe Mrs Sullivan can make some sense of it." He switched on the loudspeaker and then told their client about Pete's discovery, but she too could not explain the enigmatic phrase.

"I'm sorry, but I can't remember the photo or that line... but I'm almost certain that's what Grandpa wrote. It doesn't seem anything like my parents would do."

"Did your grandfather have a special interest in geese?" Jupe asked.

“Not that I know of,” replied Mrs Sullivan. “But my grandfather was quite confused at the end. He suffered from severe dementia and could barely communicate. Perhaps that explains that strange phrase.”

“I understand,” replied Jupiter seriously. “Then this phrase could have no further meaning.”

“I think it’s entirely possible. By the end, Grandpa was so forgetful, he hardly recognized us. I remember he kept calling my husband ‘Howard’, even though there was no Howard in the whole family. My husband’s name is Cody.”

Through the loudspeaker, they heard the door bell ring at Mrs Sullivan’s house.

“Oh, excuse me... There’s someone at the door,” Mrs Sullivan said.

“No problem, we’ll get back to you when we have news,” promised the First Investigator.

“All right. Good luck with the rest of it.”

Thoughtfully Jupiter hung up the phone.

“That wasn’t very useful,” Pete said.

Sighing, Bob put the photo back in the folder. “Well, there can’t be a secret behind every incomprehensible phrases.”

“You are undoubtedly right,” Jupiter admitted and took a big sip of tea. “Are there at least any results from the research department?”

Bob rubbed his wet hair with a towel. “Unfortunately nothing great. At least now we know that there are no press releases about Sheldon Street. So publicly, nothing happened.” A look at the First Investigator’s face made him pause. “How about you? Somehow you look like you have something new to announce.”

“Well observed,” Jupiter replied, beaming. “If my detective instinct is accurate, we will shortly receive a call from Inspector Cotta.”

“I thought he’s in the middle of another case?” Pete interjected in surprise. “What makes you think he has something for us now?”

Jupiter’s smile became even wider. “It’s simple. I spoke to him on the phone after I had a brilliant idea.” The First Investigator happily leaned back and took one of his dreaded breaks to increase the excitement into the unbearable.

Annoyed, Pete rolled his eyes. “Please, Juve, can you skip it this time and just get to the point?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t panic. So... After the drudgery at the salvage yard yesterday, I took another look at our ring from the forest cabin and then did some search in Uncle Titus’s records. I had a hunch.”

Bob waved his hands impatiently. “Which is?”

“It has links with gang insignia.”

“Insignia?” Pete dimly remembered they had talked about it in a history lesson. “Aren’t those symbols of power? Like crowns and sceptres for kings?”

Jupiter nodded. “Correct. It is commonly used in criminal circles. In this case, jewellery used to express membership of a certain group.”

Bob tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I think I’ve heard of that too. They wear motif rings like that—mostly in organized gangs, don’t they?”

“Exactly,” confirmed the First Investigator. “Uncle Titus and I were at an auction in San Diego some time ago, where police-cleared items from a protection racket went under the hammer. Among other things were twelve motif rings, each with two crossed lilies. Each ring also had an engraved number, presumably for internal hierarchy.”

“Like the seven on our ring!” cried Bob excitedly. “So you think this ghost pirate could be a professional gangster?”

Jupiter frowned. “At least that would be conceivable. So I gave Inspector Cotta a clue in that direction. I also told him about the Prestons and the forest cabin, and he already has an image of the ghost pirate from the video recording. He promised to conduct a check immediately. So I think that we—”

Suddenly the phone rang.

“Turn on the loudspeaker,” Pete said. The First Investigator turned it on and picked up the phone.

“The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

At the other end, as expected, was Inspector Cotta.

“Cotta here. Hello Jupiter.”

“Inspector! I was hoping you’d call. Did you find out anything about our ghost pirate?”

“You can say that again. Listen...” The rustling of paper could be heard. “The man on the image Bob gave me is most likely Quentin Resnick, a member of the so-called Sundown Gang—hence the motif ring with the setting sun. This group was active in San Francisco in the 1970s. According to the investigation file, they had excellent contacts with the Cosa Nostra.”

“Cosa Nostra?” Pete asked uncertainly as he rubbed himself with a towel.

“Cosa Nostra, meaning ‘Our Thing’,” explained Jupiter. “It’s the American version of the Sicilian Mafia, and the FBI called it ‘La Cosa Nostra’.”

“The Mafia,” Bob murmured with a sinister expression. “Oh, man...”

## 14. The White Cat

“Amazing indeed,” remarked the First Investigator. “However, in view of our ring, it is quite obvious. What sets the Mafia apart from other organized crime groups is their strictly structured ‘families’. Since I already had a certain suspicion in this direction, I wrote something down earlier... Just a moment...”

He pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. “At the head of every family is a boss or godfather.”

“Sure, I know him!” Pete threw in. “There was that movie with Marlon Brando.”

“*The Godfather*, right,” Jupe said. “But back to the families. The boss is assisted by a consultant, known as the *consigliere*. After the boss, the next in line is the ‘underboss’, known as *sottocapo*, who looks after the day-to-day affairs of the family. He is also responsible for the captains, known as *caporegime*, and the so-called ‘soldiers’. At the bottom are the associates or the ‘Men of Honour’. Together they go about their illegal business, often with brutal violence, white-collar crime, drug trafficking, arms dealing, gambling, counterfeit money and so on. The number on the ring gave me the idea that our ghost pirate could be a member or at least the partner of such a ‘family’.”

“Someone has done his homework. Well done!” Cotta replied appreciatively. “Resnick was indeed a so-called ‘soldier’ who did the hard jobs for an influential Mafia family together with his gang. So he was a professional gangster, like what you said—carrying out robberies, assaults, extortions, the whole range—and all under the watchful eye of the big bosses. He lost his left eye in a knife fight, by the way.”

Stunned, Pete mumbled: “So he’s not a ghost, but a Mafia thug.”

Jupiter continued: “Inspector, do you know where did his spooky face colour come from?”

The inspector seemed to rummage for another piece of paper. “Ah, here... Because of a pigment disorder, Resnick was unnaturally fair-skinned. That’s why he had the Italian nickname ‘Gatto Bianco’.”

“The White Cat!” Jupiter translated with astonishment. “Now even Mr Gabbin’s crazy stuff makes sense! ... And how did this gangster get to Rocky Beach?”

“So far, this is all conjecture.” Once again, the crackling of paper could be heard on the other end of the line. “The fact is that twenty-seven years ago, the gang broke up rather suddenly. It seems that Resnick had got into an altercation with some of the bigwigs in the organization, and he was getting too uncomfortable in San Francisco, so he decided to lie low for a while.”

Astonished, Jupiter raised his eyebrows. “And he came here to Rocky Beach of all places?”

“At the moment, we assume that the Prestons had been in contact with him earlier and granted him quasi-asylum in the forest cabin. We are in the process of determining their present whereabouts in order to question them about the events of that time.”

“A mixture of invented and real horror,” Bob marvelled.

“This also explains the tremendous intimidation,” added Jupiter. “In time, it was probably leaked that a real threat actually emanated from the cabin in the forest—at least,

with the keyword 'Mafia', there was surely dead silence."

"I suppose that was true even after Resnick had long disappeared," Cotta rejoined in. "After all, everyone had the warning—one wrong word and the White Cat will come back and get even with you!"

"How long did Resnick stay here?" Jupiter asked.

"It can't be reconstructed that accurately," Cotta confessed. "The last note in the file is his date of death in August, two years ago."

Jupiter hesitated irritated. "Resnick is dead?"

"Yes, he died in a gang shooting in Monterey..." In the background, they could hear a door being opened. "Uh, just a minute, Jupiter," Cotta said.

Someone seemed to have stepped in because Jupiter heard him say: "The lady I told you about, Mrs Carlson, wants you to call her back urgently regarding a house break-in. She also said something really strange is going on in her house."

"Yes, thank you. I'll call her back, Kieran," Cotta replied in a lowered voice, then turned back to the telephone. "So, duty calls. Anyway, don't forget to bring me the complete film soon, okay?"

"Will do, sir," Jupiter said. "Thank you and see you soon." The First Investigator hung up.

"He was in a really good mood," Bob remarked.

Pete smiled. "I wonder if it's because he can finally solve a case without us."

"Anyway..." The First Investigator's features had assumed a familiar concentrated expression. "Let's get this straight. The spooky figure at the window was a gangster named Resnick, who had gone underground at the time in Rocky Beach. And this film, I suspect, shows him threatening Mrs Gabbin—maybe because somehow she had got to him. He had no idea that there was an unwilling witness."

The Second Investigator narrowed his eyes. "But tell me—am I wrong or does that solve the case? Now we know why Mrs Sullivan's grandfather pushed his family to move. When he realized what he had recorded, he naturally feared for their safety."

"And for fear of the consequences, he never said a word to anyone," Bob added seriously.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip tensely. "You are right. As far as the move, and therefore our client, is concerned, the case seems clear... but not the motive of the motorcyclist or the night intruder. We're still in the dark about that."

"'Dark' hits the nail on the head," growled Pete. "It's like flying blind..."

At this moment the First Investigator paused and remained motionless for a few seconds. An avalanche of thoughts seemed to have been triggered in his head.

"Is something wrong, Juve?" Bob asked anxiously.

"On the contrary," muttered Jupiter with an absent-minded look on his face. "If this isn't the solution to the goose puzzle, I'll eat up your entire supply of melted glove box candy..."

He sat down at the computer, called up several web pages and finally printed out a page. In the meantime, a bright smile had spread on his face.

"May we humbly request that you tell us what you found out," Pete asked impatiently.

"You may," Jupiter replied cheerfully while he grabbed the green folder. "But first, we'll take a little trip to see Mrs Sullivan again." His smile widened even more. "Then I won't have to explain everything twice."

## 15. The Wings of the Goose

With Pete's MG, they went again to Kingston Lane. The drive there resembled a slalom in places, because the Second Investigator had to avoid torn branches, overturned garbage cans and other objects that the storm had thrown onto the road. The windscreen wipers had to do hard work in the face of the torrential rain, and in the meantime Pete could only drive at walking speed, because the world in front of the windscreen had turned into a single torrent.

"First, the scorching heat and now, the flooding," Bob commented. "What's next? Deep snow?"

"That would be the worst case scenario!" Pete grinned.

Finally, they had made it after all, and shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators stood in the hallway of their client who looked at Jupiter in surprise.

"Did I hear you right? Now you know what that strange phrase about the geese means?" Mrs Sullivan asked.

"About a goose," corrected the First Investigator. "And indeed, I'm quite sure I've found the solution."

"Well, get on with it, Juve," Pete urged.

"Gladly." Jupiter gave the Second Investigator an amused look. "By the way, it was you who put me on the right track earlier. With your line about 'flying blind', you were referring, of course, to our limited vision in the search for the perpetrator's motives. But in the strictest sense, this term refers to flying an aeroplane in extremely low visibility, when the pilots have to rely on the plane's instruments instead."

"And how does that help us now?" Bob asked in surprise.

"The thought of aeroplanes suddenly made me recall the magnificent collection of models here in the hall." Jupiter pointed to the large display case. "I'm assuming that this collection belonged to your grandfather in the past."

"Yes, it's true," Tanya Sullivan confirmed. "He loved this collection and made us promise at that time that we would never sell or dispose of it."

The First Investigator nodded. "I thought something like that. May I also ask a somewhat indiscreet question whether you and your family were surprised at how little your grandfather had bequeathed to you? You said two days ago that the contents of the two boxes were pretty much all he left to you."

"Well..." Mrs Sullivan began, but Juve could tell that she was uncomfortable with the subject. "It's quite right—we were a little surprised about the very manageable estate, but then again, we knew that Grandpa distrusted banks and always kept his money in his own safekeeping. I suppose when his confusion began, we took care of everything for him."

"If my suspicion is correct, your grandfather has certainly made arrangements for his family," replied Jupiter. "However, towards the end of his life, he could no longer communicate them to you. What remained was the saying on the back of the photograph... and his last clue was the name 'Howard'."

"You mean this name was not an accident, but intentional?" Pete asked, stunned.

"That's exactly what I mean." The First Investigator unfolded the computer printout he had taken. "Because the 'goose' wasn't just any poultry, but one of the most famous planes in

aviation history—the Hughes H-4 Hercules, better known by its nickname, the *Spruce Goose*.”

“The *Spruce Goose*!” cried Bob excitedly. “It was that legendary Howard Hughes giant aeroplane.”

“Howard...” mumbled Mrs Sullivan, stunned.

“Bull’s-eye, Bob!” Jupiter praised and looked at the printout again. “During World War II, the eccentric entrepreneur and multimillionaire Howard Hughes had a gigantic seaplane built to fly American soldiers across the Atlantic. It owes its name, *Spruce Goose*, to the material from which it was built—wood!”

Mrs Sullivan raised her eyebrows in surprise. “This huge plane was made of wood?”

“So it is. The US Navy had ordered Hughes not to use any materials essential to the war effort. So all that remained was wood—but not spruce wood, as the nickname suggests, but mostly birch wood. The *Spruce Goose*, however, was not completed until 1947 and made only one short test flight, here off the coast of Long Beach.”

“That’s right—there was a movie about that a few years ago,” Pete remembered. “I think that Titanic guy was in it.”

“Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Aviator*,” Jupiter added. “But further in the text... As the military had meanwhile lost interest in this timber giant, the *Spruce Goose* was subsequently mothballed in its hangar. With a length of 67 metres and a wingspan of 98 metres, it was the largest aircraft at that time.”

“Amazing,” Bob wondered.

“This giant plane must have had a very special meaning for your grandfather.” The First Investigator now turned to their client again. “He even took a trip as far as Oregon to see it with his own eyes.”

Mrs Sullivan frowned. “And how do you know this?”

“It’s simple...” Jupiter took out the photo he had brought with him. “This photo shows Mr Kane outside the Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum in McMinnville, Oregon. This aviation museum houses a large collection of rare aircraft, the showpiece of which has been the *Spruce Goose* for some time. Although none of the exhibits can be seen behind the window front because of the light reflection, I could clearly identify the characteristic hangar on the Internet. Furthermore, the four bushes form a section of the museum’s name, namely the ‘E’ and ‘N’ from ‘Evergreen’ and the ‘A’ and ‘V’ from ‘Aviation’.”

Mrs Sullivan looked at the photo with concentration, then nodded. “You’re right. When I think about it, I actually do remember Grandpa sometimes raving about this magnificent wooden aeroplane.” She paused. “But, uh, what does that saying with the wings mean?”

Jupiter’s smile became even wider, as if he had just been waiting for his cue. “This question now takes us from Oregon back to your house here—more specifically, to your grandfather’s wonderful model collection. Next to all the farm machinery and aeroplanes from the last hundred years, I recognize the stately bow of a miniature *Spruce Goose* up there!”

All eyes were directed to the top board of the showcase.

“Indeed!” Bob cried. “That’s it!”

“That may be so,” replied Mrs Sullivan. “But I still don’t understand what—” A thought seemed to have crossed her mind just now. “Wait a minute... Do you mean...?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean,” replied Jupiter, beaming. “And we will soon know whether I am right. With your permission, could we take a closer look at that model aeroplane.”

“Sure,” Mrs Sullivan replied.

“Pete, could you please let the *Spruce Goose* fly down to us carefully?” Jupiter asked.

“You got it, Jupe.”

A few seconds later, the model of the *Spruce Goose* was on the kitchen table. It was about half a metre long and the impressive wings protruded well over the edge of the table.

“I’ve seldom been this excited,” Bob admitted.

“Even I cannot deny a certain nervousness,” the First Investigator confessed. “Let’s see...”

With pointed fingers Jupiter examined the fuselage of the plane until he felt a small groove. After some pushing and shoving, a soft click suddenly sounded and he was able to remove the upper half of the plane.

Mrs Sullivan stared into the hollow fuselage, stunned. “A wooden box!”

“So that was what the goose was supposed to guard with its wings,” Pete concluded, fascinated.

The surprise was also obvious to Bob. “A secret treasure chest...”

Jupiter nodded. “And it goes without saying that our client is entitled to open it.”

Mrs Sullivan carefully loosened the two metal fasteners and lifted the lid.

“No way!” it burst out of her.

“Dozens of coins,” Bob marvelled. “If I’m not mistaken, they’re all historical pieces.”

“You are not mistaken,” Jupiter replied as he bent over the box. “These are collector’s items of immense value.”

“Hence the book of historical coins in the box...” murmured the Second Investigator.

Tears gleamed in Mrs Sullivan’s eyes as she took one of the shimmering gold coins out of the box and looked stunned.

Smiling, Jupiter pointed to a framed photograph of Mr Kane hanging on the hall wall. “Your grandfather always thought of you and your family and made provisions for you. He just never had another chance to tell you.”

“I... still can’t believe it,” breathed the young mother. “We walked past this aeroplane again and again, day in, day out, not knowing that such a fortune was hidden in it!”

“A very special kind of stuffed goose,” Bob remarked with a smile.

“And thanks to Jupiter Jones, this special filling is finally coming to light,” Pete added.

Visibly moved, Mrs Sullivan put the coin down and rubbed her hand over her moist eyes. “You have no idea how much we could use this treasure. I don’t know how to thank you...”

“Your satisfaction is enough thanks for us,” Jupiter said, somewhat embarrassed.

“Besides, our job is not finished yet. There are still some important questions to be answered.”

He smiled broadly. “But once we have fully solved the mystery of the forest cabin, you are welcome to invite us for a big cake.”

Mrs Sullivan nodded radiantly. “I promise.”

## 16. Turning Point

After The Three Investigators had said goodbye to their overjoyed client, they drove back to the salvage yard. No sooner had they returned to Headquarters than the phone rang.

"I wonder if Cotta has anything new?" Tensely the First Investigator picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"This is Gabbin," a fragile, barely audible voice said.

"Mr Gabbin!" Jupiter could hardly hide his astonishment. "What can I do for you?"

"I just can't get that thing out of my mind," Gabbin replied haltingly. The old man seemed to have been crying. "It's been so long since I thought about my wife, and now it's all come back to me, all those images and memories..." He swallowed. "Could you maybe come back so we can talk?"

"Of course, sir." The First Investigator gave Bob and Pete a very telling look. "If you don't mind, I'd like to bring two friends along."

"Do that, my boy," Mr Gabbin said, "and... uh... you mentioned that there was a reel of film you found..."

"Yes, we did," Jupiter replied.

"Could you also bring that along?" Mr Gabbin asked. "I'd like to... well, if there is anything meaningful for me, I'd like to get that over with once and for all."

"All right, Mr Gabbin. How about we drop by at your place this afternoon, say at 3 pm."

Mr Gabbin agreed, and Jupiter put the phone down. "Fellas, the case is developing! I was under the impression that Mr Gabbin was holding something back from me. Now he wants to see the film. Perhaps we'll learn something new after all!"

"By the way, I've been thinking again about last night," Pete said. "Why do you think someone would go to such lengths to stop our investigation? Resnick's long dead and the Prestons moved away years ago. There's nothing left to investigate."

"... Nothing left to investigate?" Jupiter mumbled thoughtfully. Then his face suddenly brightened. "It may not be so, Pete."

"Then what?" The Second Investigator wondered.

"Look, the intruder tried to break into the storeroom," Jupiter explained. "There are two issues that distracted me. One, Dawson's interest in the projector made me believe that he might be the intruder trying to steal the Novalux. Two, the eye-patch thing and the ghostly white face was puzzling, but the shock effect was secondary. All the time, I thought what the intruder wanted was the projector, in fact, come to think of it, what he really wanted could be the film!"

"The film?" Bob shook his head.

"Whoever is responsible for all this is not primarily afraid of our investigation, but of the film itself!" Jupiter's eyes glowed. "He knows that we have the film clip—and last night he tried to steal the film and possibly the projector. Probably his accomplice was supposed to keep me and Bob in the forest cabin as long as possible while he broke in here at the salvage yard."

"But who knows that we have the film?" Bob wondered. "Let's see... Mrs Sullivan? Mr Gabbin? Possibly Mr Dawson?"

“But the film only shows Resnick and the woman,” the Second Investigator objected. “You can’t incriminate anyone with that. The gangster is no longer alive!”

“Exactly,” Jupiter confirmed with a grim smile. “And that means there must be more on the clip than we thought! In any case, we had better take another look at it before we go and see Mr Gabbin.”

In the next half an hour, The Three Investigators watched the film clip again and again. The high motivation at the beginning evaporated rapidly.

“Now we are watching the whole thing for the eighth time,” grumbled Pete. “I already have blurry eyes.”

“Still, there has to be something,” Jupiter insisted.

“Why do you think so, Jupe?” Pete asked. “Perhaps Mrs Sullivan’s grandfather didn’t even know what was on the film.”

“Highly unlikely. This projector belonged to him,” Jupe explained. “It was him who recorded the birthday video and then followed by that at the forest cabin. It is also reasonable to assume that he hid this reel of film in the bottom compartment. There has to be some reason to do that.”

Bob sighed. “But what? The video of the forest cabin is only a minute long and there’s absolutely nothing except the woman and Resnick.”

“Wait a minute!” cried the Second Investigator excitedly. “Stop the projector!”

Irritated, Jupiter pressed the stop button. “What is it?”

“For a very brief moment, there was a ray of sunlight through the window and in the back of the room...” Pete said. “I don’t know, but I think there was a shadow. Can you play the film in slow motion?”

“Sure, no problem.” Jupiter rewound and started the projector at reduced speed. “Let’s see here...”

With the highest concentration, the three stared again at the forest cabin scene. Suddenly Bob jumped up with his index finger stretched out. “There!”

Jupiter stopped the Novalux immediately. “Really! A glimmer of light, probably from the setting sun falling through the canopy.”

“Forward one more frame,” Bob demanded.

“Okay...”

Pete had also got up in the meantime and moved closer to the makeshift screen. “Somebody’s back there...” He pointed to a spot on the projected video in freeze frame.

“Indeed!” cried the First Investigator. “There’s a man standing in the corner of the room and—” he faltered, “and he’s holding a gun!”

“... With which he aims at the woman,” Pete added, startled.

“Wait a minute...” Jupiter had also stood up and walked stunned towards the screen. “This... this can’t be true! That’s... that’s...”

It was mid-afternoon, and the rain had subsided. As fast as the muddy ground allowed it, The Three Investigators rushed to Pete’s MG. Pete carried the Novalux projector in the box which was covered with a plastic sheet to protect it from the slight drizzle. Once stowed in the boot, the three of them went off.

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at Mr Gabbin’s house. He led them into the living room, where the First Investigator placed the Novalux projector on a large oak table.

“Once again, thank you very much for calling us back, sir,” Jupiter said. “We are just as interested to get to the bottom of what happened back then.”

“Yes, I would like to get this over and done with,” muttered Gabbin in a fragile voice. “I need a drink now. Would you like a root beer?”

“No, thank you, Mr Gabbin,” replied the First Investigator as Mr Gabbin went into the kitchen.

A moment later, he reappeared standing in the open kitchen door. The Three Investigators whirled around in disbelief and looked into the ice-cold eyes of Mr Gabbin. In his hand, he held a gun, pointing at them!

## 17. The Curse of Sheldon Street

“First of all, keep your hands where I can see them,” Mr Gabbin ordered in a hard voice, which was no longer fragile at all. Nor did his appearance have anything to do with the frail old man they knew. Straight as a candle and in a taut posture, Gabbin had built himself up before them.

“No funny business... or I shall become extremely uncomfortable.” He turned his head to one side for a moment as Gabbin’s nephew entered the living room.

“You of all people?” Jupiter still couldn’t believe it. Distraught, he looked at the armed man. “What did you have to do with all this?”

“Me? Well...” Gabbin smiled amused. “I am the ‘Curse of Sheldon Street’!”

“What?” Bob pointed out. “But that was Resnick!”

“Resnick was just on the run. I gave him shelter in the forest cabin for a while. Small favours to keep a friendship alive.”

Now Pete was completely confused. “But I thought the Prestons hid him there.”

“Yes, that’s what pretty much everyone here thought,” Gabbin replied with a grin.

“Thanks to me.”

“Then it was you who started all those rumours and horror stories,” Jupiter concluded, “just so that nobody asked too many questions.”

“When used properly, fear can be a very powerful tool,” Mr Gabbin smirked. “It has allowed me to conduct my business with complete freedom.”

“Businesses related to the respectable society of the Mafia, right?” Bob asked indignantly.

In Gabbin’s eyes, it sparkled. “Why should I burden you with unnecessary knowledge? It only hurts your belief in principles.”

“May I ask, how did you find out about the hidden film clip in the first place?” asked the First Investigator.

“Quite simply, from Desmond Kane himself.”

“From Mrs Sullivan’s grandfather?” Bob gasped.

Gabbin nodded. “So it is. Ironically, we were well acquainted without him ever suspecting a thing. Even after his family moved, we remained in contact. When his health began to fail, he called me to his house.”

“And that’s when he told you about the film?” Pete followed up.

“First, he asked me to look in on his beloved granddaughter from time to time. But then he could barely manage a clear sentence and started babbling about some ghostly man and woman—and a film that he had hidden.”

“So you put two and two together,” Jupiter surmised.

“Even though most of it was completely confusing, there was no doubt in my mind—it had to be the evening in the forest cabin when I was there... but I could tell from his words that he hadn’t seen me.”

Bob frowned. “Nevertheless, the film clip was a risk to you.”

“Without a doubt,” Gabbin confirmed. “Naturally, I wanted to find out where the film was hidden, but Kane was becoming more and more self-reproachful because he had never

said anything and was therefore guilty. I think he was trying to clear his conscience.”

“But he didn’t tell you where he hid it,” Pete asked in amazement.

Gabbin shrugged his shoulders. “He was already pretty confused at that time. His dementia then got worse and worse, so there was no point in questioning him again. The last thing I remember of him was the word ‘nova’, which he kept whispering. But I couldn’t make sense of it. After his death, I offered to help Mrs Sullivan with the estate settlement.”

“And you searched everywhere for the film,” added the First Investigator.

“Smart boy. Well, I didn’t find anything, and I thought Kane might have disposed of it, but—”

“—Then two days ago, you discovered an advertisement in the newspaper, in which, among other things, an old Novalux projector was offered for sale,” Jupiter concluded the sentence.

Mr Gabbin pulled a face. “Unfortunately, I did not notice it until late that afternoon. When I read Mrs Sullivan’s name, everything became clear. I called her anonymously, but she said the projector had already been sold.”

“So that’s how it all started,” Bob concluded. “You got our address from Mrs Sullivan.”

“That’s right,” Gabbin’s nephew joined in. “But when I got to that salvage yard, you were just leaving. Had I known you were coming here, I might not have made the trip.”

“So you’re the motorcyclist who almost killed me!” cried Pete furiously.

Jupiter nodded grimly. “If I deduce it correctly, it was merely to intimidate us to leave. And last night, the two of you were on the road again, but this time separately—one in the forest, the other at the salvage yard.”

“Unsuccessfully,” Mr Gabbin admitted. “Actually, I was hoping to give you a wholesome and lasting shock at the forest cabin. I had hoped you would stay away from this story, but you kept on snooping. Now we have to clear the air...” He sighed. “Because of you, I was actually forced to appear directly, although I always wanted to avoid that. And if John had got hold of the film earlier, you need not be here at all!”

“Just like all the years before...” Astonished, Jupiter shook his head. “A perfect disguise of lies and terror. All credit to you—I was taken in by your acting of a frail and frightened wreck. Even that little interlude with your wife’s screams was probably just for show.”

Once again, a wicked grin spread across Mr Gabbin’s face. “Not at all. Eliza’s screams were actually quite terrible... but it wasn’t because of Resnick. It was me! She tried to break up with me, threatening to expose Resnick and me.”

“What happened to her?” Bob asked worriedly.

“Well, the official version for the neighbours was that we had broken up.”

In the pit of Jupiter’s stomach, a very bad feeling spread. “And... in truth?”

“Let’s just say...” Gabbin continued in an avuncular tone, “at my instigation, Eliza has embarked upon a very long journey. From a legal point of view, therefore, it would be unwise for me to leave this film clip undamaged. May I now have the reel of the film?”

None of The Three Investigators made any effort to comply with this request.

Gabbin’s mood suddenly shifted from superior complacency to sheer rage. “If you don’t give me that reel of film right now, I’ll wring your neck with my own hands!”

Jupiter raised his hands in appeasement. “Never mind.” He put his hand into his pocket and rummaged through it.

At that moment, a loud knocking sounded at the main door, which made both Gabbins flinch. “Open up! This is the police!”

At that very moment, Pete grabbed hold of a chair and flung it towards Mr Gabbin. The chair knocked his gun to the floor. Bob quickly grabbed the gun and triumphantly held it in

the air. "I have the gun! Hands up, gentlemen!"

Jupiter then opened the door, and in came Inspector Cotta and two policemen with their guns drawn.

"In case you might like to know, Mr Gabbin," Juve turned to the elderly man, "we had taken a closer look at the film clip and indeed, we saw you in it. Therefore, we had alerted the police before we came here."

Inspector Cotta had both Gabbins arrested and brought to the Rocky Beach Police Department. The Three Investigators had followed the police car there. Two officers led the criminal duo to interrogation, while the inspector had Jupiter, Pete and Bob report to him.

The Inspector was quite astonished after he and The Three Investigators watched the film clip for the fifth time.

"Incredible," murmured Cotta. "I must have known Matthew Gabbin for 30 years. He was a respected contractor and since his retirement, he had worked in numerous social institutions. He had organized several police balls, raffles for charity, and was particularly concerned for children in need."

"Obviously all just a clever façade to hide his true self," replied Jupiter seriously.

"Which proves once again that you should never judge a person's character by appearances." The inspector shook his head in disbelief. "We were all shocked when Mr Gabbin told us that he and his wife Eliza had split up. They were such a happy couple."

"That too was probably just a semblance," Bob surmised.

Pete looked around uncertainly. "I wonder what really happened to his wife."

"We will find out, you can count on it," Cotta replied in a firm voice. "I sincerely hope that the long journey Gabbin spoke of was meant literally and not used to describe something worse."

"With him, it could be anything," growled Pete grimly.

"In any case, we must not exclude any possibility in the search for Eliza Gabbin," the inspector said. "It is conceivable, for example, that her husband had her abducted abroad with the help of his Mafia contacts. For now, of course, all this is only speculation, but we will not give up until we know the truth."

"Have you found out anything about the Prestons yet?"

"Not much, but what little we have is consistent with what you told me. My colleagues from Tampa, Florida, have just confirmed their place of residence. The Preston couple, both now in their mid-sixties, have retired to a quiet senior citizens' neighbourhood in Fort Myers. There is nothing at all against them, neither currently nor at any time during the last decades. We therefore assume that their alleged Mafia connections are indeed solely due to Gabbin's slanderous strategy. All this will be thoroughly investigated. I'll keep you posted."

"Very well, thank you, sir. And here..." Jupiter took the film reel out of the projector and gave it to the inspector, "... is the key piece of evidence that started it all."

Pete smiled. "In a manner of speaking, the only existing record of the 'Curse of Sheldon Street'."

"Excellent." Cotta took the film and put it in a cardboard envelope. "Please come back tomorrow for the final report, okay?"

"Will do, Inspector," Jupiter replied, while he and his friends stood up. "We'll see you tomorrow!"

Fifteen minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard. Pete parked his car in front of the yard office.

When the three of them were getting out of the car, someone approached them.

“Mr Dawson!” marvelled Jupiter. “What brings you here?”

Dawson smiled uncertainly. “It’s regarding the Novalux T-800 again... I really want the projector, and I am prepared to offer you three hundred dollars for it.”

So much money for an old film projector? Jupiter hesitated and then said: “Perhaps I should have a word with my friends first...”

Mr Dawson nodded, as Jupe pulled his two friends aside. “Fellas, what do you think?” he asked.

“Three hundred dollars!” whispered Bob. “Jupe, what are you waiting for?”

“It’s a great offer,” Pete said. “Moreover, we have already used it for our case. What more do you want out of it? It’s not that there are more reels of film to play on it...”

Bob nodded in agreement.

“Then that’s settled,” Jupe said and he walked back to Mr Dawson.

“Very well, Mr Dawson. Three hundred dollars—that seems a fair offer, and we’re happy to accept it,” Jupiter announced.

Bob and Pete visibly had to pull themselves together to avoid spontaneously bursting into cheers. Mr Dawson seemed to be quite content.

Pete took the box containing the projector out of his car’s boot and handed it to Mr Dawson. The man put down the box, opened it and looked inside. “It looks like it is in perfect condition. Thank you very much...”

Mr Dawson reached into the pocket of his trench coat, took out a roll of \$50 notes and counted six of them. “Here you are—three hundred dollars.” He handed the money to the First Investigator. “You really are a good salesman!”

“Thank you very much.” Jupiter put the money in his pocket and tried not to smile too much. “Uh, by the way, we have tested the projector and it works.”

“That’s even better for me,” Mr Dawson beamed. Satisfied, took the box and headed for the gate. The three boys followed him out.

Dawson put the box into the boot of his Chrysler. “Well, that’s it!” With springy steps, he went to the driver’s door.

Bob winked in amusement. “You must be really delighted to get hold of this thing, right?”

“You bet,” Dawson replied. “This ‘thing’ belongs to a limited special series of which there are only about ten left worldwide. A Novalux T-800 in such perfect condition can easily fetch between ten and twelve thousand dollars at trade fairs!”

He looked at the three boys with a broad grin, got into his car, peered out the window and called out: “So long, geniuses! Nice doing business with you!”

Then the three boys stared with petrified faces at the Chrysler speeding away.

After a few seconds, Pete found his voice again. “Did he just say... twelve thousand dollars?”

Bob nodded as if in slow motion. “I heard something like that.” Again, there was a longer pause.

Then Jupiter looked at his two colleagues seriously. “Who is in favour of eliminating this little detail from the case record?”

Pete and Bob raised their hands simultaneously. “Me!”

## 18. Back at Jill's Place

It was late morning on the next day, a Saturday. The Three Investigators decided to go back to Jill's Place to celebrate another successful completion of a case.

Together, they set off in Pete's MG to downtown Rocky Beach. At that time, there was an amazing amount of activity. As expected, after the huge downpour the previous day, the temperature had dropped considerably, and the sidewalks were full of people.

Pete parked his car and the three of them went into the restaurant and saw that it was well attended. Almost all tables were taken, but the same table they had sat at a few days ago was still free. The three headed straight for it.

"Three Cocoa Specials, please..." the First Investigator immediately placed their order of drinks with the waitress—an elderly, chubby woman with red cheeks who introduced herself as Annie.

"Three Cocoa Specials coming right up!" Annie wrote the order on a little notepad. She paused for a moment and then said: "Oh, by the way, your drinks are on the house."

"Oh, that's nice!" said Bob. "Why is that?"

"If our Rocky Beach has three investigators who are a lot more skilful compared to the local police, then you have to give them their due credit," Annie happily announced. Then she leaned forward a bit and lowered her voice: "You are the famous Three Investigators, aren't you?"

Pete and Bob nodded at once. Only Jupiter was not sure what to make of this and was looking for the right words: "The way you say that, ma'am, it almost sounds like we're heroes or something."

Clucking, Annie waved away. It looked as if she was trying to fan the three of them. "Oh, you can't fool me, boys! I've been following every article about you in *Rocky Beach Today*. You should be proud! Without you, a lot of people here wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

Free drinks for being famous, Pete thought. This was going to be a great day!

Shortly afterwards, three Cocoa Specials were placed in front of them.

"To another successful case!" the First Investigator announced in a good mood and held up his glass. Pete and Bob joined in and raised their glasses as well.

"Now shall we get on to the main agenda?" Bob suggested.

Jupiter's belly agreed with a deep rumble. "You're right, Bob."

The First Investigator looked at the menu on the table, but his two friends did not make an attempt to reach for it and yet it would have been rude to just take it. Jupiter sighed. "You order first, I can wait..."

To the First Investigator's delight, Bob refused. "Thanks, Juve, but I already know what I'm gonna have—a Double Chisum with extra everything."

"And for me, it's the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese, and vanilla ice cream for dessert," Pete said.

Jupiter immediately grabbed the menu. "I'm afraid I'm going to have a harder choice." Pete could not wipe off a smile.

Very soon, The Three Investigators were enjoying their meal. After that, they ordered another round of Cocoa Specials and a huge snack plate.

Just as they finished, Jupe's mobile phone rang and he looked at the display. "Now, who's this?" He pressed the answer button and held the mobile phone to his ear. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"The Three Investigators? Yes," the caller said. "I'm Walter Bush... If you remember, I had a TV repair shop at Sheldon Street..."

"Yes, I remember very well, Mr Bush," Jupe replied.

"Oh, okay," Mr Bush continued. "It's like this... in fact, I tried to contact you a few days ago, but there was no answer."

"Oh yes, sorry about that," Jupiter said. "When I finally answered the phone, you have already hung up... but anyway, what is it about?"

"A couple of days ago, I discovered that the wall of my shop had been defaced with graffiti," Mr Bush said.

"Yes, hmm..." Jupe continued. "On your wall? ..."

"Yes," Mr Bush continued, "there are strange characters in red paint, and they are very unlike typical graffiti you see elsewhere."

"In red paint?" Jupe repeated "... And you're sure it's not just a childish prank by some teenagers? ..."

"It doesn't seem so," Mr Bush replied. "I was more concerned that it is some sort of a message or a threat. Anyway, after I couldn't reach you, I engaged another detective to look into it. I got his contact from an ad he placed in my letter box. However, that chap couldn't do anything about it for a few days... in fact, he messed up big time, and now I have decided to contact you to see if you can take over the case."

Bob was listening to Jupe's conversation. He drew his eyebrows together, thought for a moment and signalled to Jupe. "Jupe, listen!"

"I see..." Jupiter was visibly irritated. "Er... just a moment please, sir..." he turned to Bob. "What is it?" he whispered.

"It was in the papers a few days ago," Bob said. "There have been several cases of strange graffiti around here in recent days!"

Jupe nodded and returned to his phone call. "Er, hello, Mr Bush, sorry for the little interruption... Yes, we understand that the strange graffiti seem to be part of a chain of similar incidents. If you could give me your contact details, I'll discuss with my colleagues and get back to you very soon." Jupe got out a pen and wrote something on a clean paper napkin, and then he ended the call.

Jupe quickly briefed his two friends about what the phone call was about. The three of them agreed to look into this case, and Jupe called Mr Bush back to arrange for a meeting.

"All right," Jupe announced after that. "Let's go, fellas!"